



# Reclaiming the Prophet

AN HONEST DEFENSE OF ELLEN WHITE'S GIFT

ESSAYS BY TERRIE DOPP AAMODT, ERIC ANDERSON, NIELS-ERIK ANDREASEN, JONATHAN BUTLER, DENIS FORTIN, LAWRENCE T. GERATY, RONALD D. GRAYBILL, GEORGE R. KNIGHT, DONALD R. MCADAMS, PAUL E. MCGRAW, AND GILBERT M. VALENTINE

ERIC ANDERSON, EDITOR

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**Essays by**

Terrie Dopp Aamodt  
Eric Anderson  
Niels-Erik Andreasen  
Jonathan Butler  
Denis Fortin  
Lawrence T. Geraty  
Ronald D. Graybill  
George R. Knight  
Donald R. McAdams  
Paul E. McGraw  
Gilbert M. Valentine

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# Contents

9

## INTRODUCTION

Eric Anderson

HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ELLEN WHITE

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

PART ONE

## Who Was Ellen White?

17

CHAPTER ONE

### ELLEN WHITE WAS A WOMAN

Terrie Dopp Aamodt

33

CHAPTER TWO

### EMBRACING ELLEN WHITE:

WHAT HER DEFENDERS AND DETRACTORS MISUNDERSTAND

Jonathan Butler

51

CHAPTER THREE

### MESSENGER WITH A NEW ENGLAND STYLE

Gilbert M. Valentine

## How to Read Ellen White

73

CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROPHET AS PREACHER

Paul E. McGraw

85

CHAPTER FIVE

### ELLEN WHITE AS A DEVOTIONAL WRITER

Denis Fortin

97

CHAPTER SIX

### "GOD WANTS US ALL TO HAVE COMMON SENSE": ELLEN WHITE'S GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETATION

Eric Anderson

## How to Believe In Ellen White

111

CHAPTER SEVEN

### WHAT MY TEACHERS NEVER TAUGHT ME

George R. Knight

125

CHAPTER EIGHT

### TURNING POINTS

Donald R. McAdams

149

CHAPTER NINE

### ELLEN WHITE FOR TODAY:

A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFFIRMATION

Ronald D. Graybill and Lawrence Geraty

157

AFTERWORD

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Niels-Erik Andreasen

173

APPENDIX

### ELLEN WHITE FOR TODAY: AN APPEAL

174

CONTRIBUTORS

176

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



# INTRODUCTION

Eric Anderson

## HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

Over the weekend of October 22, 2023, an unusual conference met on the campus of Pacific Union College. The word, “secret,” would be misleading, although there was no public announcement of this meeting and virtually no audience. The theme for the small gathering was “Ellen White for Today.” Far from being artificially “diverse,” the conference was mostly made up of what one friendly observer called “aged workers.” Only one participant was in her thirties. The group was united by friendship and long reflection on Ellen White. (In fact, half a dozen of the participants from southern California had been meeting almost every week for years to share their current research.) The conference included five former college or university presidents, as well as several experienced teachers and researchers of church history. In the era of *YouTube*, none of the presentations was recorded.

The conference had been built around a shared insight—or a simple hunch. All the participants believed that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination faces a turning point. The belated publication of Donald R. McAdam’s research on the writing of *The Great Controversy* offered, we thought, a chance to move in a new direction. It was time to stop arguing about “what ain’t so” (to invoke the nineteenth-century humorist Josh Billings). It was time to move from demolition of false ideas to recognizing true ones. At the end of our analysis, what could we affirm?

In Ellen White’s day, most educated people recognized the Latin adage *abusus non tollit usum*—“Misuse does not nullify proper use.” The participants in the conference accepted that the critical scholarship of the last fifty years had established how Ellen White should *not* be used. Thanks to assiduous scholars, some of whom

paid a personal price for their discoveries, we now know what we should not claim about the Adventist prophet.

In the litany of negatives, we knew that Ellen White was neither unique nor infallible. She was not unmarked by her historical context. She was not the final authority for all Biblical interpretation. She was not always original, but often borrowed words and ideas from other writers, thoughtful men and women who did not themselves claim divine inspiration. She took for granted many (but not all) of the same ideas that the Methodists and Baptists of her time accepted, from amusements to the age of the earth. Even her apocalyptic vision was rooted in her own time. As she rebuked spiritualism, compromising Protestantism, and unchanging Catholicism, she did not describe the “final movements” of earth’s history in language that included communism, militant Islam, environmental crisis, or a resurgent, imperial China. She did not envision a relentless tide of secularism engulfing much of the world, including the homeland of the Reformation.

If all this was true—and the conference participants were not disposed to dispute these conclusions—these negatives gave a very incomplete picture. Something more was needed to capture the prophet’s spirit. Abuse did not explain away appropriate, reasonable, even inspiring use. The October 22 conference was ready to concede the basic validity of the critical contextualizing work and move on to the positive work of contributing to a denominational consensus on the proper use of the writings and ministry of this remarkable woman.

We owe too much to Ellen White to ignore her or join the angry voices dismissing her as a “fraud.” Her achievements far outweigh her imperfections—or the exaggerations of some of her followers.

She was a masterful institution-builder, playing an essential role in the creation of Adventist schools, hospitals, and church organizations. She was an inspiring writer, able to motivate dramatic change and breathtaking sacrifice in the lives of believers. Over the course of a long life, she often challenged entrenched “brethren of experience,” prodding Adventists away from sectarian or heterodox positions toward orthodox Christian understandings of the atonement, the Trinity, and the transforming power of God’s love. Shaped by many sources, she wrote devotional literature that appealingly described the attraction of holy living and Christian service. Indeed, many of the participants in the Angwin Conference could testify to the dramatic power of her words in their own lives. “*Steps to Christ* prompted my conversion,” said one. “I am an Adventist today because I read *The Great Controversy*,” testified another scholar.

The book you hold in your hands is based on the presentations, questions, and dinner-table debates of the “Ellen White for Today” conference. At last, there is an

audience. Each author engages some form of the question, “What can she teach us today?” Finding a positive answer about “proper use” of this providential gift is, we believe, the most pressing issue facing Adventism. In the pages that follow, readers will discover the beginning of a work of reconstruction. The goal is simple: to reclaim our prophet by honest affirmation of her gift.

## THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ELLEN WHITE

Whenever I think about Ellen White, I remember a friend’s witticism. Although he is a theologian and far from a rigid traditionalist, he has grown tired of a certain irritating imbalance he detects among historians. Responding to his former teacher, Ronald Numbers, who found little miraculous or even deeply remarkable in the Adventist prophet, my friend exploded, “Let’s hear at least as much about her role in the creation of Loma Linda University as about her stray comments on ‘solitary vice’ and insanity!”

In other words, Ellen White’s earliest health pamphlet, *An Appeal to Mothers*, is not the summit of her health ideas nor the chief monument of her ministry. Just maybe, she should be evaluated by what she chose to emphasize in her mature work of 1905, *Ministry of Healing*.

Jokes—including my friend’s—employ hyperbole. But he had a point, I think. Discussion of Ellen White’s life and achievements has too often been a matter of combat in dense fog, with one side expending its energy capturing imperfections and the other side retreating, inch by inch, under extreme duress.

If we are to recover Ellen White as a woman in full, we should begin by reminding ourselves of her achievements. What does her statue look like from a hundred yards away—without any examination of chisel marks, faded graffiti, or traces of pigeon droppings? In other words, we need generalizations, even though we know that such statements usually require qualification, correction, or narrowing. It is useful to look up from our tree-counting to see an extensive forest. Now and then, we even need to ask, “Who planted this forest?” And “How do we preserve it?”

The authors of *Reclaiming the Prophet* will often employ the term, “prophet,” to describe Ellen White. The point is not to mystify readers nor to hide her ordinary thoughts or essential historical context. Using non-technical, layman’s language, a prophet is a person who (in God’s name) persuades—a leader who changes people’s behavior. To call Ellen White a prophet is to focus on what she built. Reluctant to take credit, she would insist that at every step of the way she was prompted,

prodded, and sustained by God's power. She would object, of course, to the title of this section—"The Achievements of Ellen White."

Yet as her spiritual heirs, we do need to think about what she accomplished. Even with a prophet, it is necessary to stand back, note long-term trends, and grant some credit to human effort. Otherwise, our assessments are likely to be skewed, unbalanced by flaws, or marred by improbable claims. "She was human, after all," should not shout down, "What hath God wrought," or even, "Look at the progress here."

Here are five generalizations that will be supported or assumed in the chapters that follow:

1. Ellen White led the Advent Movement from "fanaticism" to Christian orthodoxy.
2. Ellen White inspired the creation of a network of schools and medical institutions committed to re-creation and restoration.
3. Ellen White taught her followers to separate holy living from legalism.
4. Ellen White prodded Adventism into a world-wide mission that transcended its American roots.
5. Ellen White quietly rejected exaggerated claims about herself.

Contributors to this volume approach Ellen White's achievements in a variety of ways. Terrie Aamodt will tell us both new things and old things that we may have forgotten. The Adventist prophet was a woman in a culture that had very clear ideas about "women's work" and appropriate roles for males and females. Ellen White swam against strong tides, as she encouraged, rebuked, and warned. She turned a mother's role into something prophetic.

Jonathan Butler explains why he parts company with strident critics of "Sister White," who are ready to throw her out of the Adventist family for her imperfections. Just as we learn to live with our flawed relatives, we should see that if we reject Ellen White's leadership in our past, we are, in fact, recklessly sawing away on that proverbial limb that we are sitting on.

Gil Valentine knows that "the past is a foreign country" and helps us understand the language spoken there. Present-day readers, troubled by harsh and unsparing language, need to understand a culture that emphasized "plain speaking." Ellen White's style and temperament can be off-putting if we demand the warm, therapeutic approach prized in modern America. But that would be as unrealistic as expecting Isaiah to write in English.

Denis Fortin and Paul McGraw will underline facts that should be obvious, but in their retelling have become startlingly new. Ellen White was a preacher and devotional writer, untiringly calling her audience to complete commitment (or devotion) and faithful service. She succeeded in affirming both "the blessed hope"

and “occupy till I come”—that is, building schools and hospitals and sending missionaries to the ends of the earth. She was not an intellectual analyst or what would be called today a “public intellectual,” offering self-consciously insightful comments about the theoretical “direction” of history. She was not even a systematic theologian. Her theme, instead, was how to live in the time of the end.

In my chapter, I offer readers a thought experiment. If we are to understand the achievement of Ellen White, let us imagine an Adventist history without her. How would our history be distorted or changed in negative ways if she had died long before 1915? The point, of course, is to see more clearly what she contributed to the rise and progress of Seventh-day Adventism. As a result of her work, the denomination moved from a narrow backwater of Christianity into the broad mainstream of orthodoxy. The prophet led us into a clearer understanding of the work of the Son of God and the promise of his imminent return.

George Knight and Don McAdams will review the surprising evidence that Ellen White regularly rejected the voices that made her equal to the Bible or claimed that she was mistake-free. If we have too often made claims that we should not have made, we cannot blame her. Both men see the possibility of reclaiming the prophet by clearing away inappropriate assertions and revisiting missed opportunities. Indeed, they believe we are once again at a potential turning point.

Ron Graybill and Larry Geraty reflect on the various ways that Adventists have explained Ellen White’s ministry. It makes all the difference, they say, whether we are trying to explain our teachings to a wider Christian audience or whether we are talking to ourselves. Applying Ellen White for today requires clearer language than we have used in recent years.

Finally, a transplanted Dane offers an international perspective on the achievements of Ellen White. Niels-Erik Andreasen presents a reflective afterword on the implications of all the chapters in *Reclaiming the Vision*. After years of leadership at the denomination’s flagship university, he sees ways that her leadership could shape the Adventist future—free of some of the distinctive distractions of the nineteenth century. An Old Testament scholar, Andreasen reminds us that applying old documents to present concerns is never simple.

From start to finish, the authors of this book are committed to preserving the achievements of the Adventist prophet. In his or her own way, each scholar protests any approach that refuses to answer questions, ignores problems, or wastes a legacy. Together they are committed to reaffirming a providential gift.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

**R**eclaiming the Prophet answers four important questions:

**1. Who was Ellen White?** Terrie Aamodt, Jonathan Butler, and Gilbert Valentine offer fresh answers to this question, drawing our attention to neglected evidence.

**2. How should we interpret her writings?** Paul McGraw, Denis Fortin, and Eric Anderson suggest practical principles of interpretation for this nineteenth-century visionary.

**3. What does it mean to “believe in” Ellen White?** George Knight, Donald McAdams, Larry Geraty, and Ronald Graybill explain how to affirm her gift without exaggeration or misrepresentation.

**4. Where do we go from here?** Niels-Erik Andreasen reflects on how Seventh-day Adventism might apply an honest defense of our “Founding Mother.”

Books can provoke arguments. This one aims at inspiring thoughtful conversation rather than vehement shouting. Books about Ellen White can be controversial, with some authors rejecting her as a thief and an imposter and others insisting that she could do no wrong. We don’t find either extreme to be plausible.

Each of the contributors has been thinking about the issues addressed in this book for a long time—almost half a century in most cases. They have taught undergraduate, graduate, and seminary classes on Ellen White’s ministry, prepared Bible commentaries, written scholarly historical studies, and preached on the themes of “inspiration” and “revelation.” They have personally rejected the temptation either to vilify or glorify.

Each author is comfortable with calling what Ellen White did a gift. At the same time, they have no desire to ignore complications in the story, especially the humanity of the recipient of the gift. They hope that you will read with an open-minded yet prayerful spirit. They count on readers who want to learn from the words and example of this messenger of the Lord.

When you are finished, go back to the words of the prophet herself. Pick up your copy of *Steps to Christ* or *The Desire of Ages* or *Ministry of Healing* and look for the power that once moved you or people around you. Read her as if for the first time.

As Ellen White wrote in the crisis that followed 1888, “The question is ‘What is truth?’” She added in language that is hard to ignore: “It is not how many years have I believed that makes it the truth. You must bring your creed to the Bible and let the light of the Bible define your creed and show where it comes short and where the difficulty is.”

In that spirit, we invite you to read this book.

Seeing Ellen White whole, in the rich complexity of her earthly pilgrimage, may even remind readers of a song from her time—words that capture the way she saw the world:

“For the darkness shall turn to dawning,  
And the dawning to noonday bright.  
And Christ’s great kingdom shall come on earth,  
The kingdom of love and light.”

# Who Was Ellen White?

*“How sweet are the tiding that greet the pilgrim’s ear  
As he wanders in exile from home!  
Soon, soon will the Savior in glory appear,  
And soon shall the kingdom come.”*

—Early Adventist hymn.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ELLEN WHITE WAS A WOMAN

Terrie Dopp Aamodt

Ellen Harmon White was a woman. She was a daughter, a twin, a sister, a wife, a mother, a mother-in-law, an aunt, a grandmother. And she was a visionary, a preacher, a counselor, an institution builder, and the prophetic voice of her church.

She gained a public voice when few women had one. Her unconventional path to securing an audience involved ecstatic experiences nurtured in the enthusiastic expressions of “shouting Methodism,” a charismatic realm that also included visionary phenomena. When Ellen Harmon began to experience visions, they intrigued some congregants and repelled others. For some, the visions made belief easier—they were startling, otherworldly. For others, they were just too strange. Some former Millerites could accept these behaviors from a vigorous man—surely this was the Holy Spirit at work—but not from a frail young woman who, they claimed, had worked herself into emotional excitement, seeking attention. Only grudgingly did some of them begin to accept her vision-inspired messages.

After Ellen Harmon’s marriage to James White, her husband sought to establish the veracity of her public visions by inviting people to come forward while she was in vision, touch her body with apparent freedom, pinch off her nostrils, try to move her limbs, and attempt to capture breath moisture on a mirror. Ellen White’s frail body in vision became the proof text of her spiritual authenticity. As the years passed and public visions shifted to private experiences in the “night season,” Ellen White became a frequent preacher and lecturer, as well as the author of countless articles and books. Time after time her congregations swelled out of curiosity to hear a woman speak. The breadth of her influence on her church’s doctrine, practice, evangelism, institution-building, and culture during her seventy-year public career is unrivaled within Adventism. Again and again, the perceived limitations imposed by her gender became avenues of influence and spiritual power. As she multi-tasked her way through family and institutional roles, her weakness became her strength.

### A DAUGHTER, A SISTER

*Ellen Harmon was a daughter.* She and her twin, Elizabeth (they were born in 1827), were the youngest of eight children spaced over an interval of fifteen years in the staunchly Methodist Harmon family. While still a child, Ellen absorbed the family's newly acquired interest in the end-time preaching of William Miller. Her interest in spiritual things increased after she experienced a serious facial injury at age nine, which triggered health complications throughout her long life. She gleaned the ability from her father, Robert Harmon, Sr., to argue points of faith supported by Scripture, as he did when the Harmon family was put on trial for their Millerite beliefs and expelled from the Methodist church in 1843. But much of her spiritual formation came from the influence of her mother, Eunice Harmon, who intuitively understood her daughter's puzzlement over the steps to Methodist conversion and gently guided her to counsel with Elder Levi Stockman, a Millerite Methodist pastor, when young Ellen was unsure of her spiritual direction. Her family saw her develop the courage to pray in public at age fourteen and then had to sort out how they felt about the remarkable dreams she had in her early teens and the visions that began when she was seventeen.

Convincing both her parents and her audiences that she was doing the will of God was complicated. When women ventured into the public sphere, European and American society expected them to listen rather than speak. Visions were rare. Women having visions and speaking about them in public was unusual, to say the least. A teenage girl, traveling around Maine without her parents and speaking of her visions to a "promiscuous" crowd of both men and women was unimaginable, but Ellen Harmon did exactly that. Her calling was so strong that in early 1845 this usually obedient teenager resisted her mother's instructions to return home and stop embarrassing the family. She forged on, accompanied by a sister or another family member. Eventually James White emerged as a male protector of the travelers.

*Ellen White was a sister.* Not only was she a sister, but she was also a twin. Before Ellen's facial injury, she had been the dominant member of the pair, more physically active and more assertive than Elizabeth. She also noted that after her injury, "The relief of tears was denied me. I could not weep readily as could my twin sister, so, though my heart was heavy and ached as if it were breaking, I could not shed a tear." She was, however, susceptible to deep spiritual anguish if she felt disconnected from her Savior as a young child.<sup>1</sup>

Ellen's contact with her elder brother, John, was limited for many years because they lived far apart from each other. Her oldest sister, Caroline, who likely helped to care for the twins when they were very young, left the Harmon household at the time of her marriage at age twenty-two, when Ellen and Elizabeth were seven.

Among the other Harmon children remaining at home Ellen found an early confidant in her brother, Robert Jr., with whom she shared a deep understanding of the conversion process. During their teenage years, as they explored Millerite beliefs, she and Robert were spiritual soulmates, and after the Great Disappointment he sometimes accompanied her during her early travels when she began having visions in her late teens. The spiritual paths of the two siblings diverged following the Great Disappointment, and Robert's early death from tuberculosis at age twenty-seven came just after he accepted Adventism. Ellen and her sister, Sarah, shared Adventist beliefs, and she strove throughout their lives to bring her other sisters, Caroline, Harriet, Mary, and Elizabeth into the fold.

As adults, the opportunities for the widely scattered siblings to gather were rare, but one reunion became possible as their father's health declined. After Eunice Harmon died in 1863, her widower lived with their daughter, Sarah Harmon Belden, and her husband, Stephen, in Connecticut. When he became seriously ill in November 1866, Robert, Sr. asked to see Ellen. He wanted to hear his gifted daughter speak "to the people" one more time. She hurried from Michigan to Connecticut and sent for her three sisters from Maine—Harriet, Mary, and Elizabeth. White reported that while waiting for the Maine sisters to arrive, she and Sarah held a Sabbath meeting with their father. He dressed and sat up with them, bearing "an excellent testimony." Ellen reported that "he seemed sweetly ripened for the heavenly garner. This was his last testimony, and its memory is precious." Two weeks later, five Harmon sisters gathered at Sarah's home with family friends. "I had the privilege of speaking to them," Ellen reported in the *Review*. "It was suggested that the meeting be at the next house on account of my father's feebleness, but this he would not listen to for a moment. He stated that this would be the last time he should hear me speak, and he could not be denied the privilege." She spoke to the assembly—and particularly to her non-Adventist sisters—about a heavenly reunion and confided in her diary that her visit with her sisters was "most profitable." They were not "practically agreed on all points of religious duty, yet our hearts were one," White noted.<sup>2</sup>

## A WIFE

*Ellen White was a wife.* Ellen and James White, the ultimate power couple of Adventism, were two strong-minded individuals who did not always see eye to eye. On a deep level, though, the Whites understood their interdependence, and together they formed one of the more noteworthy spousal teams in religious history. After their marriage in 1846, she and James developed a complex partnership featuring his editing and publishing skills, her visions, and their preaching. In the early years of their marriage, they carried their Advent beliefs to clusters of seeking souls who

met in private homes. “Our congregations were small,” she recalled. “It was seldom that any came into our meetings excepting Adventists, unless they were attracted by curiosity to hear a woman speak.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout her long career she relished the opportunity to preach in Methodist churches and other venues where she sought common ground with fellow Christians who were drawn by her unusual role as a woman speaker.

From 1846 to 1849, beginning while still in her teens, she became deeply involved in the doctrinal formation of early Adventism. She made the puzzling statement that during this time her mind was “locked,” and she was unable to understand the theological discussions swirling around her. “It was one of the greatest sorrows of my life,” she remembered. But when late-night discussions and doctrinal dilemmas ground to a halt as her fellow believers muttered, “We can do nothing more,” she became the catalyst for affirming doctrine and moving forward. “The power of God would come upon me; I would be taken off in vision, and instruction would be given me. Then I could explain what they could not understand.” Her weakness became her strength. The visions produced “perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one spirit.”<sup>4</sup> The crowning irony of these early years of Adventism was that the less Ellen White was intellectually involved in doctrinal formation, the more her visions resonated with believers, and the more influential she became. But questions about her gift abounded, especially to outside onlookers. As an uncertain young woman in her mid-twenties, Ellen experienced puzzlement, and likely frustration, as James, who was concerned that her visions could create the wrong impression for outsiders, began to exclude written accounts about them from the pages of the *Review* in 1850—a banishment that would end only when Uriah Smith took over editorship of the paper in 1855.

The dual dynamic of Ellen and James was shaken after James began to experience a series of strokes in 1865. Recovery from the bleeding in his brain caused by the initial stroke was long and difficult with many setbacks. He experienced severe pain, and his mind “was confused almost beyond endurance,” Ellen reported. Her husband required perfect quiet, but he also needed someone, usually Ellen, nearby to attend to his needs. She prayed through many nights that James would be able to sleep and reported that “we frequently felt . . . a refreshing from the presence of God.” White said she considered it “not only a duty but a privilege” to care for James. “I have been nearly all my life an invalid [due to her childhood injury],” she commented to *Review* readers in 1866, “and tenderly, and patiently he has sympathized with and watched over, and taken care of me when I was suffering, and now my turn had come to repay in a small measure the attention and kind offices I had received.”<sup>5</sup>

Ellen White went to great lengths to find a living situation for her husband that he could handle. After James became ill, the couple moved frequently to find a more

healthful environment for him—from Battle Creek, Michigan to Dansville, New York for extended hydrotherapy treatments, then from Battle Creek to two other Michigan towns, Wright and Greenville, and later to Iowa, Colorado, northern California, and (briefly) Texas. Ellen White's precipitate decision to take James ninety miles by carriage from Battle Creek to Wright in December 1866, in a snow-storm no less, deeply disturbed fellow Adventists in Battle Creek, who claimed she was recklessly endangering her own life when her sons desperately needed at least one living parent. Between the lines of these criticisms was a challenge to her prophetic inspiration—how could someone, if she truly had a special gift from God, do something so foolish, so unaccountable? As Ellen and James lodged with friends and ministered to the Wright congregation, the deep snow prevented James from getting outside as much as Ellen felt was needed. She borrowed a pair of boots from her host and tramped out a walking course for James, making steps for him to follow. She would continue to try to rehabilitate James both physically and emotionally, but the residue of judgmentalism and ill-will in Battle Creek unleashed by the Whites' hasty exit would haunt Ellen and James for years.

In the spring of 1867, feeling unwelcome in Battle Creek, the Whites purchased a farm near Greenville, Michigan, and built a home there that summer, where they lived with their younger son, Willie, while their older son, Edson, was away at school. Because Dr. Jackson at Dansville had warned James away from both mental and physical exertion, he became fearful of doing much of anything, which intensified his depression. "I knew that he must have a change," Ellen recalled. "This was the object we had in view when we purchased the little farm. His once active mind could not be at a standstill. . . . He must become interested in something beside himself." She devised a plan to reactivate her husband. She bought three hoes and got Willie and James to join her in their garden. Ellen, unused to such intense physical activity herself, soon blistered her hands. "I pricked them, let the water out, and kept at my work. This was to provoke my husband to good works," she commented.

When it was time for the family to stack their first crop of hay after it was mowed, Ellen schemed how to get James actively involved. Their neighbors were always quick to offer assistance, but this time Ellen quietly visited them in advance, asking them to tell James, when he requested help, that they were unavailable. Generous people that they were, "this they could hardly consent to do," she wrote, but "although they said it was the hardest thing for them to do, they would follow my directions, however trying it might be to them." After the hay was mowed James reported sadly that the neighbors could not assist. Ellen replied, "Do not be troubled in regard to this. Let them know we can attend to it ourselves. Willie and I will rake up the hay and pitch it into the wagon, if you will only drive the horses and load

it.”<sup>6</sup> When it was time to build the stack tightly and precisely to shed rain (the Whites had no barn), Ellen offered to tread down the hay if James pitched it onto the stack. Her efforts to rehabilitate James reveal how much the internal dynamics of their marriage changed after he became ill.

James White struggled for the remainder of his life to overcome the effects of the strokes he suffered. He often inflicted harsh treatment on his coworkers and colleagues, and his behavior could be erratic. His despondency and depression drove Ellen from their California home in 1874; she traveled the camp meeting circuit that year without her husband, and she speculated that they might live and work apart from each other from that point forward. The breach was not permanent, and at times James would share pulpits with Ellen when his health allowed. The couple did live separately off and on, however, until James died in 1881. He was particularly hard on his young adult son Edson, but Ellen (while herself capable of giving very pointed testimonies to her elder son) stoutly defended him against his father’s tirades. James’ collegial relationships also continued to suffer. Ellen vigorously defended her husband in public and urged compassion for him, but sometimes he drove her to say things to him in private that she regretted. On more than one occasion she confided to her diary that she had had to ask her husband to forgive her for her harsh words. In 1876 her frustration boiled over into letters to James (who gave at least as good as he got) and to her close friend, Lucinda Hall. James and Lucinda had both left Oakland that spring—James to travel to Battle Creek and camp meetings, and Lucinda to visit family in Battle Creek and beyond.

When James complained that Ellen was becoming too independent by remaining in Oakland to write, she retorted, “In regard to my independence, I have had no more than I should have in the matter under the circumstances.” She then confided to Lucinda why she was content to live independently on her own in California while James worked in the East: “I can but dread the liability of James’ changeable moods, his strong feelings, his censures, his [feeling free] to tell me his ideas of my being led by a wrong spirit, my restricting his liberty, et cetera. All this is not easy to jump over and place myself voluntarily in a position where he will stand in my way and I in his.” She saw herself and James operating on two separate tracks, and they were not necessarily parallel. “God in His providence has given us each our work, and we will do it separately, independently,” she told Lucinda. She remarked that James had told her they should not try to control each other (something she denied doing), yet he “seems to want to dictate to me as though I was a child.”

Excerpts from a letter James wrote to Ellen that she shared with Lucinda reveal that James White, the leader of the entire Seventh-day Adventist denomination, was having trouble accepting the pointed advice and criticism of his wife, who in turn suspected that her husband was not accepting the validity of her God-given

call to write, instead of traveling to camp meetings with him. "While entrusted with the supervision of the whole work," James wrote to Ellen, "I think it wrong to be second to the private opinions of anyone." This was a marital moment between two very strong-minded New Englanders. James was not only the husband in this household, he was the president of the church. In human terms, he was Ellen's boss. James went on, as Ellen quoted him to Lucinda, "While on the stage of action I shall use the good old head God gave me until He reveals that I am wrong. Your head won't fit my shoulders. Keep it where it belongs, and I will try to honor God in using my own," declared this proud husband and church president. "I shall be glad to hear from you, but don't waste your precious time and strength lecturing me on matters of mere opinions."

After spilling her frustration about this letter from James, Ellen declared to Lucinda, "I shall not cross the plains this summer." But the marital pendulum swung once more. The following day, Wednesday, May 17, Ellen wrote to Lucinda again. "I received last night a letter from James expressing a very [different] tone of feelings," she told her friend. James' more conciliatory tone (no doubt he regretted his line about not putting her head on his shoulders) pulled her back from the sharp comments she had made in previous letters. She clearly regretted her strong statements and the blistering quotes between her and James that she had shared with Lucinda. "I am sorry I wrote you the letters I have," she confessed. "Whatever may have been my feelings, I need not have troubled you with them. Burn all my letters, and I will relate no matters that perplex me to you." She had also apparently confessed to her Savior her impatient words. "The [Sin-bearer] is my refuge. He has invited me to come to Him for rest when weary and heavy laden. I will not be guilty of uttering a word again, whatever may be the circumstances." She resolved to return to what she claimed was her regular practice of suppressing angry words. "Silence in all things of a disagreeable or perplexing character has ever been a blessing to me. When I have departed from this, I have regretted it so much."

The conclusion to these tense weeks in 1876 did not mark the end of conflicts between Ellen and James, however. He remained president of the church until 1880, and his difficulties relating to other church leaders became even more fraught. In his final months as church president, he and John Harvey Kellogg, MD, the director of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, got into a vicious dispute. Each man tried to manipulate Ellen White into supporting his side of the conflict. These stresses, compounded by a severe ankle injury that kept her on crutches for months in early 1881, reduced Ellen's public impact as she and James tried to refashion a life outside of the leadership spotlight. A further complication between wife and husband was a bitter dispute about how to deal with Edson's struggles. The Edson issue deepened their estrangement, and Ellen decided she would spend the

summer in Colorado alone, rather than travel a truncated camp meeting circuit with James.

It did not turn out that way, though. Ellen accompanied James to camp meetings in Michigan and Iowa in June, and then they returned to Battle Creek. There Ellen described a time of reconciliation between them in mid-July. "My husband often asked me to accompany him to the grove, near our house, to engage with him in prayer. These were precious seasons. Upon one of these occasions he said, 'I have not prayed as often as I should. . . . The nearer we come to God, the more we feel our own weakness, and our need of help from above.' " On Sabbath, July 30, the couple attended church together in Battle Creek. Early the following week they both came down with severe malaria and were transported to the sanitarium, where they were carefully tended by Dr. Kellogg. James, no doubt weakened by his stroke-related infirmities, died on Sabbath afternoon, August 6, two days after his sixtieth birthday. Ellen, a few months short of her fifty-fourth birthday, eventually recovered from her illness, but she struggled to find purpose in her life in the months that followed. Writing from her long-deferred Colorado destination in September, she told her son, W. C. White, "I miss Father more and more. Especially do I feel his loss while here in the mountains. I find it a very different thing being in the mountains with my husband and in the mountains without him. I am fully of the opinion that my life was so entwined or interwoven with my husband's that it is about impossible for me to be of any great account without him." In time, Ellen White would regain her footing and forge a powerful solo career in her sixties and seventies, fondly remembering James in 1906 as "the best man that ever trod shoe leather."<sup>8</sup>

### A MOTHER

*Ellen White was a mother.* When they were first married, Ellen and James struggled to survive on James' earnings of fifty cents a day as a common laborer. As they both answered the powerful call they felt to spread their Adventist beliefs to whomever would listen, they left their first two sons Henry (born in 1847) and Edson (born in 1849), in the care of others during their infant and toddler years. The conflict between the everyday realities of society and the demands of spiritual leadership peaked in Ellen White's dual roles as mother and prophet. Her writings again and again demonstrate that her maternal instincts were alive and well, but her denial of them for spiritual purposes makes painful reading. A detailed account of these years appears in her 1860 autobiography, where she weighed tending baby Henry at home versus leaving him with someone else. "I believed that the Lord had spared [Henry] to us when he was very sick," she said, "and that if I should let him hinder me from doing my duty, God would remove him from me."<sup>9</sup> Believing that God

would take the life of her baby if she denied the impression to travel and witness to the approaching Advent says something both of her picture of God at that time and her concept of her gift.

When White became depressed by separation from her sons, "yearning for my children . . . battling with my feelings," an angel told her in a dream that her gift of her two sons to the Lord "is more precious in his sight than gold or silver, for it is a heart gift. It draws upon every fiber of the heart as no other sacrifice can." Those words were apparently easier for the angel to say than for Ellen White to hear. When she and James saw Edson again, his mother said, "He clasped his little arms about my neck and laid his head upon my shoulder."<sup>10</sup> This attachment made separation even more difficult.

In 1852, when Edson was three years old, the family moved to Rochester and found themselves in the middle of a cholera epidemic. Edson came down with the disease and was near death when his parents prayed over him. "He felt relief at once," his mother recalled. Another woman in the room continued to pray for Edson's healing, and the little boy "looked up in astonishment and said, 'They need not pray any more, for the Lord has healed me.' " He continued to be very weak, however, and ate nothing for the next three days. His parents determined that when he began to eat again, they would begin their next preaching trip and take him along. The following day he asked for chicken broth, and that evening "we commenced our journey," his mother related. "About four o'clock I took my sick child upon a pillow, and we rode twenty miles." She rocked Edson all that night in a squeaky chair, and neither she, Edson, nor James slept a wink. The next morning the groggy parents wondered if they should give up and go back to Rochester. "The family who had entertained us said we should bury the child on the road," his mother remembered. "And to all appearance it would be so." But Ellen feared that if they abandoned the journey and yielded to "the work of Satan to hinder us from traveling," Edson would die anyway. " 'He can but die if we go forward,' " she said to James. " 'Let us proceed on our journey trusting in the Lord.' I was much exhausted, and feared I should fall asleep and let the child fall from my arms, so I laid him upon my lap, and tied him to my waist, and we both slept that day over much of the distance."<sup>11</sup> By the time the journey was finished Edson had revived and regained his strength, but the anxiety White felt for Edson throughout her life was rooted in these difficult experiences.

The Whites were able to live a more settled life when they moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1855, about a year after their third son, William Clarence, (Willie, or W. C.) was born and they occupied a house to themselves for the first time. Still, they were called upon to travel frequently and gratefully relied upon their close friend, Clarissa Bonfoey, to take care of their boys while they were

away. She had assisted them off and on since Edson was a baby. But Bonfoey suddenly took ill and died in the spring of 1856, and White became very concerned about her sons. "My children were my greatest anxiety," she wrote. "How could I leave them? They had been deprived of our care so much, that they needed attention from one that could feel an interest for them."<sup>12</sup> When she was writing and publishing her memoir, *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2, in 1859 and 1860, White reflected on those difficult weeks in 1856. Throughout the childhoods of her boys, she felt the incessant tug between her commitment to her prophetic call, given before they were born, and her love for and commitment to her sons. The singularity of her prophetic call meant that she could not shift some of its burdens to others, although she would do so to an extent when she hired editorial assistants later in her career after her sons were grown. Her maternal role held other complexities as well.

White loved her children and yearned to be their primary caregiver. But when she was away, whoever was put in charge of the boys became the authority. Clarissa Bonfoey had been practically a member of the family, and White felt assured that her motherly wishes were being carried out by her close friend. Bonfoey's death not only ruptured the comfort level White had achieved for travel, but it also created a chaotic environment for Henry, eight, Edson, six, and Willie, not quite two. Moreover, Bonfoey's death and White's precarious health afterwards made her wonder whether she, too, might die suddenly. "I left them, with a mother's keenest feelings," she wrote describing travel she undertook shortly after Bonfoey died, "and thought, as I parted with them that I might not be permitted to return to them alive. I was assured by one of the sisters, that my children need not trouble my mind, that they would have especial care for them. I rode in much suffering to Monterey [Michigan], coughing almost incessantly." At Monterey the couple prayed for strength, and Ellen reported that "the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me."<sup>13</sup> She gave her testimony five times and began to feel stronger.

This incident did not have a storybook ending, however. When the Whites came home, they learned that their children had not been properly cared for, and thus a new round of crises arose for their mother. "When I returned home [from Monterey]," she recalled, "I found that my children had been neglected by those who had assured me that they should be cared for." Then she expressed her personal frustration of trying to participate in the universal clan of motherhood while responding to her singular prophetic call.

Our work had been to travel, and then write and publish. Henry had been [away] from us five years, and Edson had received but little of our care. For years at Rochester [1852-1855], our family was very large, and our home like

a tavern, and we from home much of the time. I often felt grieved as I thought of others who would not take burdens and cares, who could ever be with their children, to counsel and instruct them, and to spend their time almost exclusively in their own families.<sup>14</sup>

Though speaking in the plural here, White is referring primarily of herself as she describes the domestic sphere where women typically lived and led.

It was not unusual for fathers to be away from their family on business, as White's father had been at the time of her childhood accident. But her mother had always been there for her children. Eunice Harmon would have found it unthinkable to leave her large family under the care of a variety of domestic helpers to itinerate with her husband, Robert. And if she been traveling with him at the time of Ellen's accident and the weeks afterward, their child would likely have died. Now a parent herself, Ellen must have reflected on those realities as she surveyed the havoc she faced when she and James returned from Monterey. If God wanted her to be a prophet, why couldn't He lead her to reliable domestic help? And why could not other women, safely relegating their lives to their own domestic spheres, step in occasionally and give the Whites a hand? "Does God require so much of us, and leave others without burdens?" Ellen asked rhetorically. "Is this equal?"<sup>15</sup> She knew that her careful maternal work could be swept away by circumstances of travel.

Her boys were far from perfect, she knew. Why did the White boys misbehave at times? Because they were not properly disciplined, the neighbors might say. "We have not neglected the rod," White insisted, "but before using it have first labored to have them see their faults, and then have prayed with them. We have our children understand that we should merit the displeasure of God, if we excused them in sin."<sup>16</sup> She made a strong case for the disciplinary earnestness she and James wielded, but what happened while the parents were away at camp meetings and speaking appointments? How thoroughly could the Whites transmit their caregiving values and disciplinary practices to a succession of hired helpers? There was plenty for the neighbors to talk about, and the community never seemed as tolerant of the Whites' complicated lives as Ellen would have wished.

White was clearly frustrated by the lack of capable domestic help. She longed to have one girl employed full time exclusively to do sewing. Her references to sewing are numerous enough to indicate that during the early years in Battle Creek she hand-sewed virtually all of her family's clothes, from trousers to overcoats. The domestic tasks were so challenging that she mused, "Sometimes I think I will confine myself to my little family and attend to their wants, but if I do I am sure to lose ground and bring condemnation on myself." Sometimes she was overwhelmed by the multitasking challenges she faced. "My mind cannot be everlastingly planning

and cutting and contriving, and yet be prepared to write for the *Review and [Youth's] Instructor* and answer the numerous letters sent in to me. I want to know my place and then I will try to fill it.”<sup>17</sup> Despite her desire for clear counsel, her answers would come only sporadically and partially. Juggling her multiple spheres of responsibility was never easy, and, as the scholar, Laura Vance, has noted, White’s public activities went against the grain of nineteenth-century American culture.<sup>18</sup>

Like so many nineteenth-century mothers, White had to watch helplessly as two of her four sons died. She avoided preaching and travel in the fall of 1860 as she recuperated from giving birth to her fourth son, John Herbert. At three months of age, though, he became seriously ill with erysipelas, a bacterial infection. Alerted by a telegram, James hurried home from a long speaking tour, and a few days later their baby hovered near death. In the wee hours of December 14 Ellen was called to his bedside, and she knew his life was ending. “That was an hour of anguish for me,” she wrote. “We watched his feeble, gasping breath, until it ceased, and we felt thankful that his sufferings were ended.” Deeply in shock, she did not weep. “I fainted at the funeral,” she remembered. “My heart ached as though it would break, yet I could not shed a tear. . . . After we returned from the funeral, my home seemed lonely. I felt reconciled to the will of God, yet despondency and gloom settled upon me.”<sup>19</sup> This compassionate woman who wept at the deathbeds of her friends’ children experienced a sorrow too deep for tears when John Herbert died, an echo of her emotional condition after her childhood injury. In both cases, she may have felt a need to stay strong for her family—her twin, on the one occasion, and her surviving sons on the other. Her childhood struggles to survive the aftermath of her injury may have inhibited her ability to express personal grief as an adult. Her loss would be compounded in 1863, when her eldest son, Henry, died from pneumonia at age sixteen.

Although Ellen White did not address the matter explicitly, she knew that American family structures in the nineteenth century expected mothers to supervise the home while their husbands engaged with the public. The mother, as queen of the home, was assumed to have the primary responsibility for bringing up her children. That ideal, however, went unreached at times. As Joan Hedrick, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Harriet Beecher Stowe, has noted in remarks following a 2009 lecture, nineteenth-century child care often depended upon the extended family rather than the nuclear family, and “it was not thought that the mother had to focus so intensely on the children.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of the Whites, “extended family” would include caregivers such as Clarissa Bonfoey. But for Ellen White, this complex reality was not the ideal home life she envisioned and described in her writings on family life.

Even with the tacit permission of secular society, White continually felt the

seesawing demands of her call to public ministry and her responsibilities at home. She never fully resolved the demands of these conflicting roles, but she dove earnestly into her domestic role. When at home, she read stories to her sons on Sabbath afternoons, cultivating both moral education and the love of books. She and James led their family in singing hymns, a showcase for the musical talents they all shared. But their time together was limited. When at home in Battle Creek, James spent much of his time at the Review office, according to Willie White's recollections late in his life, and "Mother's time and thought were largely absorbed in her writings and her public work. Thus, though they did what they could to plan useful activities for them, their boys were left much to themselves."<sup>21</sup> The reality of the Whites' daily lives was often remote from the ideal to which they aspired.

Amid the stresses of her far-flung ministry and the discomforts of travel, Ellen White carried out her motherly role long distance, sending her sons frequent letters of advice and admonition—a form of epistolary parenting. She spared her sons the more difficult aspects of their parents' travel and focused on the high points. In these accounts, White sought to fill her and James' long absences from home with detailed narratives of these worlds so far from Battle Creek. During the 1860s she gradually took on more speaking roles, and accounts of them gave her something positive to report to family at home.

As their surviving sons, Edson and Willie, entered their teenage years, Ellen and James knew their boys would need more consistent parental guidance. They vowed to settle down in Battle Creek and spend more time as a family. But the day after they returned from what they expected would be their final extended trip in August 1865, James experienced his first stroke. Instructing the boys to help the family respond to their father's health emergency with good behavior, the parents hurried to Dansville, New York, to seek healing via the water cure at Dr. James Jackson's Health Retreat. But good behavior is not what happened. A few weeks later Edson shot himself in the hand while attempting to load the handgun his parents had forbidden him to obtain. At least two newspapers in the area noted the incident, remarking that the youth was the son of the well-known Adventist leader, James White. Edson's mother, writing from afar, tried to rein in her anger and likely a healthy dose of panic as she wrote to Edson about his mishap. She acknowledged that Edson lived under a microscope in Battle Creek and that his past failings may have led "the brethren and sisters . . . [to] surmise things in regard to you that are not correct. . . . But when they see you going directly against that which they know to be our express wishes, see you secretly making trades, borrowing firearms, and concealing it carefully from us, can you, my dear boy, wonder that they lack confidence in you as an obedient, faithful, truthful boy?" She noted that Edson

had said to her in the past, “You do not know your son,” indicating that Edson had become alienated from his parents. “We want to know our son, to know that we can rely upon his fidelity to us and that he will be true to what he knows to be right principles,” she insisted. Not for the first time, she laid out parental expectations for Edson that he knew he could not fulfill. She told him that his parents had “the tenderest, kindest feelings towards you,” and were concerned that he was suffering, wondering if his injury might prevent him from ever playing his beloved melodeon again. “We shall try to comfort and not blame you,” she assured him.

Ellen White well remembered the times she and James had nursed Edson through serious illnesses when he was a baby and in his early childhood. She had believed then that his life was spared to allow him to serve some greater purpose in the world, and now her boy had shot himself in the hand and was the talk of Battle Creek. She sought to remind him of the gift of his healing from several serious childhood illnesses. “In answer to our earnest prayers,” she told him, “your heavenly Father has raised you up several times when you seemed to be almost in the icy arms of death.” She hoped he would use that “lease of life which God has granted you of service to others and to glorify God by your Christian course.”<sup>22</sup>

White’s anguish is evident at this moment when she felt she was at the end of her parental rope. Edson would continue to be troubled for decades, and over time his mother came to understand better and to acknowledge why he was fragile. The stability and consistent love little Henry had received at the home of Stockbridge and Louisa Howland, where his parents left him for five years, had not been available to Edson, who was moved from place to place with various caregivers, and he had clearly been anguished when separated from his mother as an infant. The White family paid a personal cost for the parents’ devotion to their divine call, their public causes. Edson’s struggles led him to exit the denomination his parents had built and into which his father had baptized him as a boy. In 1893, his mother, once again distant—this time in Australia—wrote him a powerful appeal, and this time her epistolary parenting hit home. Edson returned to the Adventist faith and gave many years of service in the American South. His work with black people in Mississippi in the 1890s influenced his mother to articulate their spiritual equality with their white neighbors.

As an adult, Willie, or W. C., took a very different path from Edson’s. His environment in the family home the Whites managed to establish in Battle Creek was more stable than what Edson had experienced in his early years. Willie became the faithful, reliable adult son who, after his father’s death, filled many of the roles James had once carried. He assisted his mother with manuscript preparation and

became the bureaucratic insider within the church structure that James had been. During Ellen White's later years, W. C. became the gatekeeper as flocks of Adventists sought her counsel, and after her death he became the primary guardian of her legacy.

### A PROPHETIC VOICE

*Ellen White was a visionary, a preacher, a counselor, an author, an institution builder, and the prophetic voice of her church.* The extent of her impact on the institutional formation of Seventh-day Adventism has been intensively documented by Gilbert Valentine in *The Prophet and the Presidents* as well as by numerous contributors to the Adventist Pioneers Biography Series published by Pacific Press. Her methods of shaping the church she loved ranged from the conventional (letters and periodical articles exhorting leadership to heed her counsels, sermons delivered at General Conference sessions, and cultivation of young, innovative leaders) to the unconventional (behind-the-scenes work with key committee members, revelations to church leaders that an angel had informed her of their deliberations in supposedly secret meetings, and even elaborate clandestine lobbying schemes). These aspects of her life have been widely studied, but her personal life, as described here, provides a counterpoint to the familiar story of the role of her visions, sermons, books, pamphlets, periodical articles, and personal counsel that did so much to shape Adventism. Both aspects are essential to seeing her whole. Her willingness to step far outside of the accepted female sphere of home and family is a remarkable chapter in the history of nineteenth-century American women.

### FOR FURTHER READING

- To better understand the complexities of writing about nineteenth-century women, see Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, Rpt. Ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).
- The lives of literary women described in Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), hold relevance for Ellen White's life and career.
- Ellen White spoke in public countless times, often to a "mixed multitude" of audience members outside her own religious faith group, and her sermons were widely reported in newspapers across the United States. An impressive sampling of public speeches by women during White's lifetime is Dana Rubin's anthology, *Speaking While Female: 75 Extraordinary Speeches by American Women* (RealClear Publishing, 2023). Although White is not included in this collection, she ought to be.
- For helpful context on nineteenth-century marriage, see Jessica Weiss, "The Meanings of Marriage in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century United States," *Journal of Women's History* (Winter 2022): 170-179.

## Reclaiming the Prophet

- In addition to the numerous biographies in the Adventist Pioneer Biography Series that deal with the influence of Ellen White on Seventh-day Adventism during her lifetime (and you should read them all), Gilbert M. Valentine's *The Prophet and the Presidents* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2011) is an invaluable guide to the dynamics between Ellen White's prophetic voice and the church leaders she influenced.

## CHAPTER TWO

# EMBRACING ELLEN WHITE: WHAT HER DEFENDERS AND DETRACTORS MISUNDERSTAND

Jonathan Butler

*“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7, NIV).*

When I try to distinguish the “true prophet” from the “false” one, I invariably think of my maternal grandmother, or “Granny,” who was not a prophet of any kind. Depending on the day, she could be a wonderful matriarch or a bundle of imperfections—“Good” Granny or “Bad” Granny. As a child, my mother knew her at her worst. In those days, Granny mostly ignored her children and spent her time sunk deep in an easy chair reading classic literature or historical tomes, but never the newspaper. The world as it was at that moment was of little interest to her. She measured her days poring over books, downing copious cups of black coffee, and puffing on the occasional cigarette. Her raggedy children fended for themselves in the wooded canyon where they lived.

Her husband, an engineer, and later our sweet, diminutive grandad, occupied himself with chores when work during the Depression was scarce. He had built the family’s house on the side of a mountain, supported on stilts—an engineering miracle. But that seemingly magical house was a troubled home. Many a day with Granny was marred by one of her volcanic rages spewing its suffocating ash and hot lava over anyone in her vicinity. The children and her beleaguered husband did their best to stay clear of Granny when her anger erupted. But there was no place to hide, especially for my mother, the oldest child and the one, reportedly, who showed early signs of standing up to her.

Everyone had a “favorite” horror story about Granny. In a fit of temper, she once threw a scalding hot pie on her daughter. Another time, Granny ordered the same daughter to do the dishes at a sink where a new counter had just been installed, insisting that she splash no water on the counter. When the eight-year-old did get

water here and there, Granny charged into the kitchen, wielding an axe, and chopped up the new counter.

Today, Granny would have been put on medication or face investigation from “child protective services.” But for the family, from generation to generation, she was simply a colorful character that we tried to avoid on her bad days. In later years, we still knew when my mother was talking on the phone with Granny by the rising temperature in her voice and by the way she almost always slammed down the phone.

Granny’s altercation with her sister Zoe over the book of Revelation was tragic. After a heated disagreement about a single passage from Granny’s favorite book of the Bible, the sisters never spoke a word to each other for more than seventy years. They did finally reconcile, the moment captured in a photograph taken on Zoe’s front lawn—two women in their nineties, hand in hand, their white hair glistening in the sun, with no memory of the Bible passage that had come between them.

The woman who made peace with her sister Zoe that luminous summer day was the “Good” Granny. And there were plenty of other examples of how good Granny could be. During the Depression years, when hungry strangers came by the house looking for a handout, Granny invited them in and fed them at the family table. Though Granny could, at times, inflict pain on people, she also sympathized with “wounded birds” she came upon—in the family, the neighborhood, and in the church where she finally found Jesus.

Granny and my mother became Seventh-day Adventists as adults when my Aunt Lilah, Mom’s sister and a new Adventist, gave them Bible studies. Many a Sabbath afternoon, they met after church in a beautifully lush and endlessly green park near Granny’s home, where they talked while the kids played, except for the boy who hung back to eavesdrop on the adults. On those irenic Sabbath afternoons, none of the three women had forgotten the torments and sadness of those years in a house on the side of a mountain. But the hatchet that had chopped up a kitchen counter was mostly buried.

The small talk and the talk on grander topics among these women reflected a deep bond that had been earned the hard way. They had learned to agree more than disagree, at least on Sabbaths in the park. How women should dress in church and how much makeup they should wear. How everyone’s children should behave in the pew. Who sang flat in the choir, but didn’t know it. And which teacher in Sabbath School preferred C. S. Lewis to Ellen White. Every Sabbath they reviewed the sermon, of course, as if they’d been hired to do so. They graded the pastor on how skillfully he used the Bible and on how amply “Ellen White says” appeared in his sermons.

Like so many Adventist children of that era, I *heard* Ellen White before I *read*

her—the prophet's voice channeled through Granny, Aunt Lilah, and my mom as they chatted into the afternoon shadows. But their deep familiarity with Ellen White—the way they often cited her as the last word on a subject—did not mean they cared less for the Bible than for the prophet. Granny routinely read the Bible clear through every year, from Genesis to Revelation, at the rate of roughly four chapters a day.

What made her the “Good” Granny, however, was not that she quoted the Bible and Ellen White at every turn. It was, rather, how she lived her life—on her good days anyway—in ways that made other people's lives better. Granny was hard to live with at close range, but that did not stop her from helping others. Aunt Lilah used to say, tongue in cheek, “Mom loved humanity; it was people she couldn't stand.” Eventually, her generosity was legendary; she could never hang onto money when she saw someone in need. Though not a wealthy woman, she found the means to pay for a struggling family's parochial education for their children. She lavished financial help on her own children and grandchildren as well. Eventually, she came to regret helping Aunt Lilah more than my mom, so Granny offered Mom a new house, free and clear. As it turned out, my mother's relationship to her mother was still a little too prickly to accept such an exorbitant gift.

It was not just her grand gestures that made the “Good” Granny good. It was her smaller, quieter, but memorable moments when she shared her humanity with others. The oldest brother in our family, Joel, was never my mother's favorite and provoked a little of the “Bad” Granny in Mom that she had inherited from her mother. Based on an unfortunate misunderstanding, Mom once locked teenage Joel out of the house, because she believed he'd been drinking. There were no woods where Joel could hide, but there was “Good” Granny's house. Into his ninth decade, Joel still warmly remembered being “mothered” by Granny for several wonderful days, with her caring and her great cooking.

My most compelling memory of the “Good” Granny is the reading she introduced to me. She raved about Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, so much so that I wanted to be his Sancho Panza. She also hauled out *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and read plays to me as a pre-teen—*Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and especially *Hamlet*. I memorized Hamlet's soliloquy for Granny: “To Be or Not to Be.” And when I recited Hamlet's moving tribute in “Alas, poor Yorick,” I held up a cantaloupe for the human skull of Yorick to Granny's merriment. She then took me to an Old Vic performance of *Hamlet*, where the play came alive for me and etched itself in my heart. I had seen glimpses of the “Bad” Granny as a “wicked witch” in flight, scarier than the witches in *Macbeth*. But for me, the “Good” Granny totally eclipsed the “Bad” Granny. The “Good” Granny transformed my life into something new and a little miraculous.

### GRANNY, ELLEN WHITE, AND OTHER FLAWED HUMANS

In introducing a discussion of Ellen White as “prophet” or “fraud” by digging up family lore about my Granny, I do not mean to suggest that there is a close comparison between Mrs. White and Granny. To be sure, they were both magnificent, complicated women, at once talented, spirited, intelligent, and caring, yet undeniably flawed people. Both women were monumental influences in my life. They each explain, in different ways, who I am and how much less I would have been without them. But there were important differences between them. It was a matter of scale. Granny had deeper problems and more limited claims than Ellen White. Granny herself would have admitted that. But she provides a metaphor of just how human one’s human nature can be, even if one is a charismatic religious leader in whom Granny fervently believed.

Our own, personal matriarch taught her family an important spiritual lesson. Her mercurial swings between light and darkness helped us realize that people cannot be sharply divided between the good and the evil in them. Every one of us is a mix of the two—a kind of mini-incarnation of how the divine and the human coalesce in us. When therefore attempting to distinguish between a “true” prophet and a “false” one, it is best not to think in either/or terms. Our tendency is to elevate the “true” prophet high on a pedestal and to denigrate, or more likely demonize, anyone we judge to be a “false” prophet for falling short of perfection. Ellen White herself may have encouraged just such black-and-white thinking when it came to her own vocation. She insisted that she was “of God” or “of the devil”—an either/or framing of the divide. This allowed for little middle ground between the grand ideal and the mundane reality. Ellen White’s most adoring supporters and her most vitriolic critics seem to agree with her on that point. She could be either a super-woman of saintly biography or the pitiful failure found in angry exposés. She could be nothing in-between. Her defenders are wrong to place her on too high a pedestal, and her detractors are just as wrong in tearing down her statue.

There is, however, an in-between that is present in all of us, including prophets and grandmothers, and we need to come to terms with its implications. It demands less of us to think of people at either end of the spectrum—as either all good or all bad—because we’ve clearly reached conclusions about them that demand no further thinking at all. But the good people with flaws or the bad people with redeeming aspects call for more critical, nuanced thinking. We must ask how much clay can there be in the feet of our spiritual giants? How good or bad can they be and still be worth following? How defective can the clay vessel become and still carry its spiritual message to us? The answer to these questions has to do with that middle ground between the ideal and the reality. To understand prophets and

grandmothers, we cannot end the discussion with what we adore in them or loathe in them. We can truly understand and appreciate them only by navigating the space between the extremes—where they are more ordinary and more human, and where, in relating to them, we must use our good judgment without becoming hanging judges.

Most of life in the middle ground finds us between, as it were, that transcendent day when we said our wedding vows (and meant them) and our ordinary day-to-day life as a married couple—between the things we didn't say (but should have) or said (but shouldn't have). In any family or any church (which is much like a family) we must allow life to be a mix of its soaring, incandescent moments and its dreary failings, debacles, and embarrassments. That's true of life with Granny and it's true of life with Ellen White. In my family, none of us wanted to declare ourselves emancipated from Granny. However imperfect she may have been as a person, she remained integral to us. We could not have imagined our lives without her. In a similar way, Ellen White occupies an indispensable place in our church family. Whatever her faults or limitations, it is impossible to define Seventh-day Adventism without her. There are Adventists who try, but without much success. It's a bit like rejecting Martin Luther, but seeking to remain Lutheran or turning one's back on Thomas Jefferson while celebrating America. There is a movie—a comedy—entitled, "Throw Momma from the Train." In the more disgruntled corners of Adventism, there are those who would throw Ellen White from the train. But is that even possible? And what would become of the train without Ellen White aboard? Would it lose much of its momentum? Would many of the passengers find another mode of travel?

Why would we want to throw Momma or Granny or Ellen White from the train? What would prompt such harshness? Let's look more closely at this. How many of us would have tolerated a pastor who lusted after a beautiful married woman in his congregation, impregnated her, and then solicited a hit man to have her husband killed so that he could marry her? If my three favorite women in the park had known this to be true of their pastor, would they ever have listened to another of his sermons? Yet that is roughly analogous to the sordid story of David, Bathsheba, and her husband, Uriah the Hittite. The women in the park knew of this low point in David's life; Granny read about it once every year in 2 Samuel 11. Granny, my mom, and Aunt Lilah, all believed David wrote the Psalms; they never read the scholars who had a different idea. But authorship is beside the point here. These women cherished the Psalms while believing them written by a murderous adulterer. However, they would have wanted their pastor, if guilty of the same immoral acts, to be defrocked and disfellowshipped.

Never mind the pastor who would be sent packing—how many foibles would

we allow Ellen White before selling all her books at a garage sale? Let's say we learned that Ellen White had had an affair with S. N. Haskell, and the two of them conspired to have their spouses murdered. (I never use ALL CAPS, but if you are an inattentive reader, I hasten to add, THIS DID NOT HAPPEN! Keep reading carefully.) After all, Ellen White exchanged more letters with Haskell than with anyone else. And he was devoted to her. No one was more literalistic regarding the nature of her inspiration. Not only that, but after her husband, James, died, Ellen received a marriage proposal from Haskell. She turned him down for no better reason than she wanted to preserve her penname—E.G. White—rather than assume the name Haskell, less familiar to her ever-widening readership. In her waning years in Elmshaven, there was only one photograph next to her bed—that of Stephen Haskell. That's fact not fiction.

Despite the familiar Bible story in 2 Samuel, it is stunning to imagine this vile story could have repeated itself with Ellen White and Stephen Haskell. The fact that Seventh-day Adventists are likely to be less tolerant of Ellen White's misbehavior than they are of King David's could be quite revealing. One conservative Adventist book was audacious enough to rank Mrs. White as "the greatest of all the prophets." That's the highest of pedestals, and it's also a longer way to fall. In spite of David's checkered life, Adventists read the Psalms. But would they forgive comparable moral lapses in Ellen White and continue to read *The Desire of Ages* or *Steps to Christ*?

What does it mean when we expect too much of the righteous and too little of the wicked? What does it mean to believe a psalmist and a murdering adulterer cannot be one and the same person? Or that Mother Teresa and Jimmy Swaggart—or Ellen White and Joseph Smith, for that matter—have nothing in common? It means there is an inability to see the gray, conflicting ambiguities of the in-between. It means we have forgotten when we read the Psalms that 2 Samuel 11 is hidden within these lyrical hymns. With one text we canonize David, and with the other we condemn him. We must ask ourselves whether a broken man can produce inspired literature, or does the writer's humanity drain the divinity out of his writing?

Regardless of the psalmist's humanity, how do we read Psalm 42?

"As the deer pants for streams of water,  
So my soul pants for you, my God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God?  
My tears have been my food  
Day and night,  
While people say to me all day long,

‘Where is your God?’  
These things I remember  
as I pour out my soul  
how I used to go to the house of God  
under the protection of the Mighty One  
with shouts of joy and praise  
among the festive throng.”

Regardless of the prophet’s humanity, how do we read *Steps to Christ*? The more we know of her—both the highs and lows of her life—can we continue to value her personal and literary gifts to us? After becoming aware of the flaws of the writer, do we read her texts and still find them inspiring? As we learn about the failings of artists—including our “artist”—do we go on treasuring their art? Are we any longer moved by the opening lines of *Steps to Christ*?

Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love. Our Father in heaven is the source of life, of wisdom, and of joy. Look at the wonderful and beautiful things of nature. Think of their marvelous adaptation to the needs and happiness, not only of man, but of all living creatures. The sunshine and the rain, that gladden and refresh the earth, the hills and seas and plains, all speak to us of the Creator’s love. It is God who supplies the daily needs of all His creatures. In the beautiful words of the psalmist—

“The eyes of all wait upon Thee;  
And Thou givest them their meat  
In due season.  
Thou openest Thine hand,  
And satisfies the desire of every living thing.” Psalm 145:15, 16.

Ellen White’s shortcomings were nothing compared to King David’s major sins. Our imaginative speculation on Ellen White and Stephen Haskell remains an obvious fiction. Adventists, and more recently non-Adventists, have pored over the prophet’s life and career for more than a century since her death. They’ve turned up examples of human frailty, but hardly much in the way of skeletons in her closet. She left her young children in the care of others, though she wrote prolifically on model parenting. She struggled in her marital relationship to James, but freely doled out marriage advice. She saw in vision the ideal of a vegetarian diet, but continued to eat meat now and then. As a New Englander, she struggled to give up oysters. Though a committed temperance reformer, she used a little medicinal wine.

Ellen White was a Victorian woman without what Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called “a spice of wickedness,” but instead had nothing more than a few peccadillos. These rather banal blemishes on her character hardly disqualify her as a prophet (if you have read any no-holds-barred biographies of prophets), nor should they relegate her to the fraud category (on nothing but peccadillos). They were the makings of Ellen White’s middle ground between prophet and fraud, which reminds us, simply, that she was human. The supposed revelations into her moral lapses are pretty inconsequential stuff. They are a far cry from adultery and murder, which themselves are human flaws, if egregiously so. The fact that some Seventh-day Adventists become so titillated by the inconsistencies of Ellen White’s lifestyle likely exposes more about them than it does about her. For one thing, it strongly indicates that any criticism of the prophet along these lines suggests that she is still setting the agenda for her critics. They reject her, if it comes to that, because the ideals she fostered remain authoritative for them. It’s a bit like declaring you’ve emancipated yourself from your parents while continuing to live in their basement.

No one should end discussion of Ellen White’s humanity with her penchant for oysters; her New England background left its mark on her in more consequential ways. New Englanders were, by nature flinty, abrasive, and blunt. Perhaps it was because of the region in England from which they had migrated. Or because of the severe weather of the region. Or because of the rock-hard, forbidding ground which made a misery of farming. Whatever the explanation, Ellen White personified New Englanders and could be, herself, as unyielding as a granite wall in winter. She was not the only New Englander among Adventists, of course. The movement fanned out from the northeastern United States, initially into the Midwest, for land more productive for Adventist farmers and people more receptive to Adventist evangelists. If they gratefully left New England behind, Adventists brought the temperament of its people with them.

Later generations of Seventh-day Adventists, in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, might find it difficult to share Sabbath lunch with their nineteenth-century spiritual ancestors. These crusty Adventists of the past would likely have peered into the souls of their “brothers” and “sisters” visiting them from a later time and found them wanting. In fact, they were just as critical of their nineteenth-century contemporaries. Early Adventists were not only critical, but blessed with long memories. On their protracted trek west, they clung to their grudges as if they were cherished family Bibles, though what estranged them from family or fellow Adventists were often patently petty matters. It appeared as if any newly formed Adventist congregation in Michigan, Wisconsin, or Iowa lived on the brink of breaking apart over inextinguishable irritations, disagreements, or feuds. These Adventists knew nothing yet about “passive aggression;” open confrontation was far more

commonplace among them. And schism had as much to do with personalities as doctrine or practice.

### AN INSPIRED OR INSPIRATIONAL WRITER

Ellen White felt right at home in this nineteenth-century Adventist world, which she had a hand in creating. The prophet brought “plain-speaking” with her from New England—in all likelihood an inheritance from the Quakers or early Methodists, and a language familiar to Adventists. She delivered her testimonies in plain-speak that was often brutal in its candor and humiliating to people when exposing their character defects in public. The testimonies were the core of Ellen White’s ministry as a prophet. They were the heartbeat of her inspired writings. The prophet was more protective of them than of any other aspect of her ministry. In her view, to criticize them was to reject her as God’s messenger. Among later generations of Adventists, the tone of plain-speaking is a foreign language, and the nineteenth-century New Englander is equally as foreign. But if Ellen White, in her testimonies, has grown distant from later Adventists, she was joined at the hip to her contemporaries. Her plain speaking was in a language her fellow Adventists understood and thrived on hearing and reading. It did not remove them from her, but bonded them to her.

When it comes to inspired writings, everyone has his or her own “canon within a canon.” With respect to Ellen White’s corpus, more Adventists are now drawn to *The Desire of Ages*, or *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, or *Steps to Christ* than to the *Testimonies*. For Ellen White herself and for her contemporaries, however, the *Testimonies* were the “canon within the canon;” these were the *inspired* writings. The *Conflict of the Ages* series, on the other hand, belonged in the lesser category of *inspirational*. By way of the *Testimonies*, God spoke through His special messenger with unique clarity and authority to the Adventist people. These letters, permeating the lives of every Adventist, were the *spirit of prophecy* for Ellen White and for her people. The prophet was especially protective of God’s message as conveyed through them, and she was most defensive when these writings were challenged. In the *Conflict* series, Ellen White sought, for the most part, to be no more—and no less—than a devotional writer, who was read, not only by Adventists but by non-Adventists. For her, this meant undergoing a fundamental change, widening her horizons, taking on a new task, which would occupy her day and night for most of her life. She had gone through changes all along—from an ecstatic teenager to a married woman, to a young mother, to a founding mother, to an institution builder.

How Ellen White defined and redefined herself as a writer, however, may well have been the biggest change of all. She was no longer the girl afraid to speak in public or who tentatively sent a letter to an editor with no expectation it would be published. Her earliest writings were raw, inelegant prose—rough drafts of a young

writer learning her craft. Autobiography, short meditations, and letters—especially letters—were the easiest, most natural place to start. It was the letters—the *Testimonies*—that ultimately defined her as an *inspired* writer for Adventists. With the *Testimonies*, Ellen White was a spiritual mother who occupied every room in the Adventist household—the parlor, the kitchen, the study, and the bedroom—as well as Adventist pursuits beyond the home. In the multi-volume *Conflict of the Ages*, Ellen White took on another purpose. She was no longer the home-bound spiritual mother; her new career, so to speak, had taken her away from home.

With no small measure of audacity, she hoped to transform herself into an acclaimed devotional writer in the wider world. The literarily unimpressive letters that made up the *Testimonies* were what was generally classified as “woman’s work.” Ellen White stayed within her skill set—topically and stylistically—with this unpretentious literary effort. The more demanding and imposing *Conflict of the Ages* was the prophet’s way of moving beyond “woman’s sphere” to make something of herself in a man’s world. In this sense, Ellen White was a striver who was dissatisfied with her parochial limits; she wished to speak in a more universal language. How successful she was at achieving this is another story. But to know her intentions—her aspirations—as a writer is to read her with a deeper awareness and higher regard. Between the kind of writing that she did in the *Testimonies* and that of the very different *Conflict* series, the momentous, watershed moment came, in 1858, with her new, far more ambitious, literary undertaking—*The Great Controversy, Between Christ and His Angels, and Satan and His Angels*.

We should not draw too sharp a distinction between her *inspired* and her *inspirational* writing. For Adventists, the two blurred together, and Ellen White put up little resistance to this. Over time the *inspirational* writing came to occupy the same sacrosanct place that her *inspired* writing had carved out for itself. Unfortunately, this has led to a dangerous confusion regarding how Ellen White understood her writings and how we should understand them. The *Testimonies* had gushed forth as if by stream of consciousness—a divine stream of consciousness—with none of the careful craftsmanship necessary in tracing the biblical, historical, and spiritual narratives of the *Conflict of the Ages*. Ellen White had been *shown* the *Testimonies* in vision. She had *learned* of the *Conflict* narrative by the studious and exhaustive reading that most writers do. The *Testimonies* were bathed in *inspiration*; the *Conflict of the Ages* soaked in *perspiration*. In putting pen to page, in all her writing, Ellen White doubtless experienced the rushes of inspiration that other writers report as they write. We are discussing here, however, what is essentially two genres of writing—that of the visionary and that of the inspiring preacher.

Thinking of the *Testimonies* as one kind of writing and the *Conflict of the Ages*

as another can help us understand what is generally considered Ellen White's most gaping vulnerability—the inspired writer who borrowed, in fact plagiarized, so generously from other writers. From her teenage years as a visionary, whose utterances in trance were impromptu and unpolished, Ellen White exhibited no insecurity as a visionary. She believed that her visions were from God and as faultless and unimpeachable as the God who sent them to her. They were also her only access to a seat at the table. They were the single, spectacular means by which a sickly, under-educated, milliner's daughter would ever be taken seriously in a patriarchal society in which women—especially this particular woman—would, otherwise, not easily fit or flourish. The visions assured her and her Adventist community that, without question, she belonged.

If her self-confidence as a visionary never wavered, however, she could be quite self-deprecating as a writer. She bemoaned being “a poor grammarian,” as if that did much to thwart good writing. If anything, her “poor grammarian” concern was another indication of just how little she knew about what good writing entails. She felt a lifelong sense of loss for her abbreviated early education and the obstacle it created for her as an author. It needs to be underscored here that whatever statements in Ellen White's massive body of work might give one pause or invite disagreement, her admission that writing was not her strong suit was not one of them. It was not false modesty; it was the truth. Her literary prolixity resulted from applying herself to scrawling words on a page. But she was far from a naturally gifted writer.

Ellen White wrote, because she was compelled by God and encouraged by her fellow Adventists to communicate in writing what she “had been shown” in visions. This forced her to take up the literary cross almost daily. There was no shirking of this responsibility—no climbing down off this cross. Nor did the visions necessarily make the writing come more easily; more than likely, they made the literary task harder. To see a film, suffused with intense drama and rich, luxuriant imagery—and then be asked to describe in writing what you've seen on the screen—is one of the hardest of things to do. It has been said that in every prophet there is more than a little charlatan, for the prophets—as visionaries—inevitably fail at adequately describing what they have seen in vision. No one is more profoundly aware of the discrepancy between what they are trying to say and what they manage to say—or write—than the prophets. Already burdened with her own keen sense of insecurity as a writer, Ellen White's visions did not relieve her of the author's anxiety; they exacerbated it.

Ellen White's two kinds of writing provoked very different criticisms of the prophet's work. And the critiques also prompted very different responses from the prophet. One of the most notorious, direct challenges to the *Testimonies* came from a Battle Creek physician, Charles E. Stewart, M.D., whose eighty-nine-page, “Blue Book”, named for the color of its first edition, identified the supposed

“contradictions, inconsistencies, and other errors” within the *Testimonies* and other writings which Ellen White had directed against the Battle Creek medical community. A number of Adventist physicians joined Stewart in placing the prophet’s writings under a microscope subjecting her testimony to critical parsing. The fact that Ellen White’s opponents in this open dispute were physicians, who, in many cases, owed their career choice to the prophet, might have smacked of biting the hand that had fed them. There was no hint of gratitude in the “Blue Book”. There were, instead, parallel columns to expose apparent contradictions and to exhibit literary dependencies. Ellen White wrote an open letter “To Those Who Are Perplexed Regarding the Testimonies Relating to the Medical Missionary Work.” She followed it with more than thirty letters and several *Review and Herald* articles. The Blue Book mattered to her, because it targeted the *Testimonies* and by implication the visions on which they were based. The *Testimonies* were the purest expression of Ellen White’s authority in print form. To fault them was to disparage her credentials as a prophet.

The *Conflict of the Ages* came under scrutiny, too, but Ellen White took the criticism in stride. It made all the difference that her calling as a visionary was not being questioned—only her career as a more ordinary writer. The *Conflict* series became, over time, a massively ambitious undertaking. It is unlikely that Ellen White could have imagined with the publication of *The Great Controversy in Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 (1858), that she had embarked on a half century of writing and rewriting that would evolve through the four-volume *Spirit of Prophecy* (1870-1884) to the five-volume *Conflict of the Ages* series (1890-1917). For a woman uneasy about her writing abilities, she had produced her dazzling *magnum opus*. Though it had been a monumental achievement, there were a number of indications that Ellen White had been out of her depth in writing it. To do what she did, therefore, had been seen as miraculous. But it involved an enormous amount of good, old-fashioned, elbow grease as well.

For the most part, Ellen White did not write the books in this series *as books*. Nor did she write, initially, any of her books beyond this series that way. She wrote articles, which were later compiled into books. And she relied on an increasingly extensive literary staff to accomplish this for her. Though she oversaw this literary enterprise, her assistants did the ground-level work while she awaited the finished product. The staff mined material from her previous work; they did the laborious copyediting; they also accomplished the more creative transformation of a myriad of short, disjointed pieces into integrated books. In performing this literary magic, Ellen White’s staff had to cut, at times, the prophet’s own writing from the final draft and feature borrowed writings. The amount that Ellen White drew from other authors in the *Conflict* series proved considerable. Indeed, little of the *Conflict* series seems to have been rooted in the prophet’s visions, while much of it can be

traced to the writings of others. In time, the pejorative term “plagiarism” was appropriately applied to her literary practice and probably in all fairness. This did not lessen the work of her literary assistants. In the case of Marian Davis in particular—whom the prophet referred to as “my bookmaker”—she may have deserved co-author status.

All this considered, Ellen White never felt especially chastened by the charges of plagiarism. When her literary borrowing became more widely known, it did nothing to invalidate, in her mind, the kind of writing she did in the *Conflict* series. Literary borrowing was the scaffolding by which she climbed up from her limited literary capabilities to become a prolific author of serviceable and, at times, eloquent prose. It may have been an unkind, but working assumption that, for the most part, her best prose has been borrowed. In truth, Ellen White was more noteworthy as a reader than a writer. She read voraciously, and her personal library of some eight hundred volumes only hinted at the extent of her reading. She read aloud to her family, she read alone for hours at a stretch from authors within her religious community and, increasingly, from authors beyond its borders.

Much of her reading was done for a purpose. Like mothers read to their children to benefit them; like law students cram to pass the bar exam; like pastors study to prepare sermons; she read in order to write. Her publications became, to a considerable degree, anthologies of her reading. From the outset, she was embraced as an inspirational writer but, in fact, she may have been better characterized as an inspired reader. When she read devotional works that inspired her, she passed the contents along to her readers to inspire them. Typically, it requires a certain amount of hubris to be a writer. The writer has to believe he or she has something worthwhile to say—important enough to command a reader’s undivided attention for hours. But for Ellen White, hubris had little to do with her writing. Instead, what she wrote was born of modesty. On her own, she had little to say. She was no more than a conduit. The *Testimonies* channeled God’s messages in a special way. The *Conflict* series, and other devotional works of hers, transmitted her divine messages more circuitously, by way of other inspiring authors. Either way—borrowing from God or from others—she was merely the messenger.

In the 1880s, two books served as lightning rods of the plagiarism charge against Ellen White. One of them was her *Sketches from the Life of Paul* (1883) in which she drew heavily upon Conybeare’s and Howson’s book of twenty years earlier. The other was *The Great Controversy* (1888), which can be traced, in its inception at least, to John Milton, over two hundred years before. Ellen White made high claims for both books. Though it may have been more of a marketing ploy, she suggested that her visions had made them must reading. But the way the books were actually written—with all their incorporation of other writings—identified them less as the

outgrowth of visions than the toil of her writing process. The literary critique of both books, however, pressed Ellen White with a new question, which elicited a very different answer from her than Adventists were used to hearing. After the turn of the century, the *Blue Book* faulted the way the *Testimonies* were written in what amounted to an assault on the truthfulness of Ellen White as a visionary. The eyebrows raised over the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy* posed another kind of problem for its author. Ellen White had leaned extensively on others for the narrative and without attribution. This proved no existential threat to the prophet as visionary. She had assumed a new task—a new calling, as it were. It had less to do with the visions by which she led her people and more to do with writing for a public that stretched beyond her circle of belief.

If anything, Ellen White preferred underplaying the supernatural in accounting for the more public writing. What mattered to her Adventist critics was how best to reach the more general non-Adventist market with the *Conflict* series. She could do so only by writing their way, by their rules. It was acceptable to copy the prose of other authors; that was done all the time in the late nineteenth century. What Ellen White had failed to do was footnote her sources. When confronted with her omission, she happily accommodated her critics. In her view, this did nothing to weaken her as a visionary and did everything to bolster her as a writer. Ellen White was just as obliging with respect to historical inaccuracies within her great controversy narrative as she was with the uncredited borrowing. She easily conceded that she was not an historian. She did not need to be an expert in history to write on Christian history from the first to the nineteenth centuries. She was satisfied—in fact it was what she sought—to be a popular writer, not an “expert.” And, similarly, she did not need to be an expert geologist, or biologist, or other kind of scientist to write about the origins of the world in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

### FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND

The idealizations of Ellen White—the admirers who treat her as impeccable—remain popular among defenders of the faith, though increased realism has crept into them. Exposés of the prophet are still best sellers among her critics, for whom the saintly stories function as disingenuous foils. On the face of it, those who write hagiography and those who write exposé appear to be opposites, yet they have much in common. They each settle for the all-or-nothing answer regarding the prophet. In doing so, they sustain a familiar strain of Seventh-day Adventism—they are absolutely sure of themselves. Each places Ellen White at the center of their belief system. The defenders are Adventists because of Ellen White; the detractors have left Adventism because of her. For both groups, Ellen White either deserves the

highest praise or the sharpest ridicule, but in both cases, she commands the center of their attention. In a way, there is something of a symbiotic relationship, with respect to the spirit of prophecy, between the “left wing” and “right wing.” The “left” feel betrayed by the “right’s” portrayal of an Ellen White who did not live up to their ideal. Both sides in this debate, then, are united by their mutual fundamentalism; both sides are extreme.

The least popular approach with the defenders and the detractors—but the one that matters most to us here—is a study of the altogether human woman between the two unacceptable extremes—unblemished sainthood or the rankest humanity, “Good” Granny or “Bad” Granny. Fair-minded historians of Ellen White are called upon to explore the middle ground between the two extremes, where they—where all of us—come face to face with a very human prophet. I recently read a lively and insightful book by Alan Jacobs, entitled, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*. As I read it, I thought of how applicable its thesis is to Seventh-day Adventists struggling to come to terms with Ellen White. I also thought of my late, beloved grandmother. Jacobs offers a literary guide for connecting to voices from the past in order to enrich our present lives. He cribbed his title from W. H. Auden, the English poet, who once wrote, “Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.” In the books we read from the past—especially the classics—we sit at the table and “break bread,” as it were, with people who speak to us, write to us, from a strange and wonderful past. To cite varied examples, first- century Christians such as St. Paul, sixteenth-century reformers like Martin Luther, and nineteenth-century Adventists like Ellen White lived in a past which was very different from our time, filled with all sorts of ideas and practices unfamiliar to us. As L. P. Hartley writes in the opening to his novel, *The Go-Between*, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

Ellen White, her husband James, their colleagues and companions, the churches and camp meetings they attended, all seem part of that foreign land where people lived lives we no longer live and spoke a language we no longer speak. Historians would crave the opportunity to travel back in time and mingle with those nineteenth-century Adventists and pick their brains about all sorts of topics. But how many of us would invite them home for dessert and coffee? Jacobs writes, “The dead, being dead, speak only at our invitation: they will not come uninvited to our table.” We invite Ellen White to our table by way of the books she has written. But the fact that reading her books is now our only connection to her also distances her from us.

We don’t read as much as we once did. Our television screens have gotten much larger, and our bookshelves much smaller. Ellen White wrote at a time when people read by candlelight and oil lamps, pages dense with text, long into the night. Through her steady stream of publications, Ellen White was an intimate and ubiquitous presence in Adventist lives. Our generation is more distant from Ellen White.

We are still free to invite her to our table and break bread with her—by pulling down one of her books from the shelf. But we are less likely than past generations to do so. In commenting on how books link us to our significant others from the past, Jacobs does not have Ellen White in mind, though he may as well have been thinking of us and her:

There are many wonderful things about books, but among the most wonderful things is that you can close them when you need to, when they become a little too strange, too disturbing. It's like being able to quit someone's table instantaneously but without causing trouble or offense. And the fact that you can escape so easily might actually be a good reason *not to*.

In our attempt to understand Ellen White, we fault those among us who can live only at the extremes, without allowing for a middle ground between them. This surfaces in how we read books and break bread with the dead. Too many of us close a book if we disagree with any part of it. In effect, we leave the dinner table if we disagree with anything our guest says. Alan Jacobs teaches college students who protest reading an author who exhibits any degree of racism or misogyny or other form of “political incorrectness.” Seventh-day Adventists often grow up reading, as it were, only books on the approved reading list. Ellen White placed her imprimatur on such lists. Though she meant well by recommending what to read—only the best for her people—it was likely a mistake on her part to welcome so few guests to the table. It’s part of maneuvering the middle ground to read books with which we do not entirely agree and to invite people for Thanksgiving dinner with whom we can learn to disagree agreeably. With respect to Ellen White, if we are to break from the either/or paradigm of prophet versus fraud, we need to be able to read her and critique her, invite her to dinner, embrace her in love, but recognize we have our differences with her. This is both the peril and the promise of meeting her on the middle ground of her humanity. We can have too much reverence for Ellen White to realize she is ever wrong. By thinking of her more analytically, we may find in her, ironically, someone of greater spiritual value to us. She can teach us in that space between prophet and fraud without herself personifying perfection. We can draw wisdom from her books without equating those books with the Bible.

In the magisterial *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, there is an essay co-written by Jud Lake and Moon entitled, “Current Science and Ellen White: Twelve Controversial Statements.” This is an essay that explores the prophet’s humanity—her middle ground—as a tension between claims of timeless “truth” based on transcendent visions over against the stubborn reality that Ellen White’s “truth,” on so many topics, was a product of her times. When confronted at

several turns with Ellen White's imperfect context in the realm of science, the essayists battle valiantly on her behalf. Alan Jacobs understands their dilemma, which is being caught between two conflicting forces—the critics of the prophet who challenge her science and the traditionalists who make the best of her science.

Her critics engage in what historians call “presentism.” Looking back on Ellen White as their ancestor, they tend to attribute a primitive simplicity to her very different ideas and cast their own views as complex and intellectually superior. This condescending perspective on the prophet postures what C. S. Lewis terms “chronological snobbery.” The weakness of this view is that the critics believe there is nothing to learn from the past.

The traditionalists believe they can erase the gap between Ellen White's time and their own. This tends to be characteristic of religions which are based upon books—such as Judaism, or Christianity, or Seventh-day Adventism (which is indebted to them both). For those who believe in these sacred texts, there is a sense in which the words speak to them with remarkable immediacy across the centuries. Ellen White, who also remains present through her books, has never disappeared from Adventist view. The weakness of this traditionalist view is that one sees the past—the first century or nineteenth century—as though it were the present. What is required, instead, is to understand the past as different from the present but sharing much in common with it, too.

When we open a book by Ellen White, when we break bread with her, we need to remind ourselves that she lived a long life and lived it a long time ago. She wrote about the world coming to an end in a few months or years, and she wrote about how to live in a world that has lasted much, much longer. She urged adhering to the law in all but a legalistic way, and she underwent her own reconversion which led to a new gospel emphasis in the church at large. She wrote “inspired” *Testimonies*, and she wrote the “inspirational” *Conflict of the Ages* series. She wrote *Early Writings*, and she wrote *Steps to Christ*. There are books by Ellen White that we might not read anymore, or books of hers we might read only part way through before setting them aside, or books we cannot put down once we've started them.

After all his reading, Alan Jacobs knows what it's like to begin a book in which nothing resonates and then you discover “that it moves you. It touches you. You are caught up in its story and you care about its characters.” You have found what amounts to the “utopian moment” for you within the book. Jacobs borrows—yes borrows—a wonderful idea from another author—“the authentic kernel” inside the book that speaks to you. From that point on, you are reading the author in a “double fashion.” You do not ignore what you know to be “the problems with the book, its errors, its moral malformations.” Nor do you ignore what becomes, for you, the “utopian moment” in the book.

When we read Ellen White, we must also read her with “*double* vision.” We read the part that lifts us, transports us, that makes us into something new. That is the “authentic kernel.” It’s all we have been reading for, nothing else. For me, it’s as if I’m on the sofa next to the “Good” Granny, as she reads to me aloud from one of her favorite books. She is no longer alive, but I still learn from her.

### FOR FURTHER READING:

- Russell R. Standish and Colin D. Standish, *Greatest of All the Prophets* (Hartland Publishers, 2004) provides an outsized example of an Ellen White high on the pedestal, as no less than the “greatest of all the prophets.”
- Steve Daily, *Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography* (Page Publishers, Inc., 2020) turns the Standish brothers’ view inside out by insisting she’s the greatest of all frauds.
- Graeme Bradford, *Prophets Are Human* (Signs Publishing Company, 2004) finds a more tempered “middle ground” for Ellen White by continuing to believe in her as a prophet while acknowledging her as an imperfect human.
- Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008) took on the subject of the prophet and health, where some of the highest claims had been made on her behalf. Though his findings were controversial when introduced in the mid-1970s, the church benefited, in the long run, from Numbers’ more realistic depiction of White as a nineteenth-century health reformer.
- George R. Knight, *Meeting Ellen White: A Fresh Look At Her Life, Writings, and Major Themes* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996) offers an insightful and readable overview of the prophet’s life and writings.
- Jud Lake and Jerry Moon in “Current Science and Ellen White: Twelve Controversial Statements,” deal with one aspect of the prophet’s human side—several of her problematic comments on science. See the essay in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, editors, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, Maryland, 2013) 214-240.
- Gilbert M. Valentine, *J. N. Andrews: Mission Pioneer, Evangelist, and Thought Leader* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019) discusses how Ellen White’s “plain speaking,” especially in her general testimonies and personal letters, became crucial vehicles by which the “messenger” conveyed her messages. See *J. N. Andrews*, 236, 238, 246, 259, 260, 296, 337, 340, 390-392, 545, 546, 558, and 560.
- Denis Fortin, *G. I. Butler: An Honest but Misunderstood Church Leader* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2023) explores Ellen White’s troubled relationship with G. I. Butler, which led to ruptures and reconciliations between them. See *G. I. Butler*, 123, 124, 213, 306-309, 604, 616, and 618.
- Alan Jacobs, *Breaking Bread with the Dead: A Reader’s Guide to a More Tranquil Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020) encourages us to read authors from distant times and places and benefit from them in deeply important ways. It is impossible for Adventists to read Jacobs without thinking of Ellen White and how she can continue to matter to them.

## CHAPTER THREE

# MESSENGER WITH A NEW ENGLAND STYLE

Gilbert M. Valentine

**A**s the two hundredth anniversary of her birth approaches, we know much, much more about Ellen White than we once did. And much of the “more” has become available only recently.

In 2015, in connection with the centennial of the church leader’s death, the trustees of her literary estate released transcripts of all her correspondence and her other manuscripts to be available online. Included with the release were the many “incoming” letters that had been written to her during her lifetime. These were the letters that had provoked her own letters or were responses to them. Within the last decade, Ellen G. White Estate officials have also made available online their complete files of the correspondence of both Ellen’s husband, James, and her son, William C. White. These provide rich and important context for Ellen White’s own materials.

Close scholarly study in recent years has produced revealing new insights into her life and leadership. Between 1981 and 1984, Ellen White’s grandson, Arthur White, produced a massive, detailed, six-volume account of her life. Even more helpful than this important resource, in recent decades Adventist scholars have written fifteen in-depth biographies of key Adventist leaders who were closely associated with Ellen White. Beginning with John Harvey Kellogg (1970) and ending, thus far, with George I. Butler (2024), each of these scholarly biographies has revealed valuable new information about Ellen White as she interacted with her colleagues in leadership and with others. We have learned much that we did not previously know about her temperament, her informal judgments, and her ability to change her mind. These new historical accounts—benefiting from the study of the incredibly rich resources of conversation and interaction between Ellen White and others which flowed all around her—have provided many more insights into Ellen White’s cultural heritage as a New Englander and further enriched our insights into her distinctive temperament and her unique spiritual giftedness. As we learn

more about Ellen White, we are newly able to see Ellen White from a full-circle perspective with views from almost every angle. We see her as a whole person—in public as a church leader and in private as the person underneath her public role as the bearer of a prophetic gift.

The first thing that impresses us from all this new information and these new studies is a fresh appreciation for what she contributed to the forming of the Adventist community. This is accompanied by a new sense of the complexity, paradoxes, and contradictions one finds in the persona of Ellen White and in her work. The picture is therefore more complete and, in that sense, more honest. To some degree, every human being is a bundle of contradictions—what we aspire to be and what we are in reality, how we perceive ourselves and how we think others perceive us, and how others really see us and how we really are in fact. All these personas are bound together in the mix of the wondrous phenomenon of self. Unsurprisingly, that is no less true of Ellen White. Her conviction that God had gifted her with a special charisma and called her to a distinctive ministry did not change her as a person born and nurtured in nineteenth-century New England. Does the traditional doctrine of an incarnational scripture help one hold the contradictions in tension—that is, a document evidencing divine inspiration authored by humans, as much divine as if not human and at the same time as much human as if not divine? Does the paradigm help in embracing the complex phenomenon of Ellen White?

In this chapter we shall first briefly explore the unfamiliar language and culture of nineteenth-century New England. We will then take a 360-degree view of Ellen White as a person inevitably formed and framed by temperament, childhood experience, and her New England culture. We shall explore how these factors, holistically and uniquely structured seamlessly into who she was as a person, not only provided the foundation of personality in which she grounded her ministry but also how that combination of factors shaped the ways in which she understood her calling as a special messenger. Insights from these perspectives need to be incorporated into the “time and place” interpretation that she herself said is necessary to understand and apply her counsel.

## NEW ENGLAND

On both her mother’s and her father’s side, four generations of the distinctive Puritan culture of New England had shaped Ellen White and her siblings. Maine, and before that, Massachusetts, had become home territory for the family, and the distinctive Puritan values had embedded themselves deeply in her family’s folkways. American historian Henry Adams, claimed that “the chief charm of New England” as a place on the map, was its “harshness of contrasts and extremes in sensibility.” The region featured dense forests and hills, hard rocky land, cold climate, and long

winters. There was “the cold that froze the blood” and “a heat that boiled it,” Adams would assert. He would argue that the “violence of the contrasts” was real and that it shaped and molded its people and the way they viewed the world. “New England light is glare,” and its atmosphere “harshens color” which in summer was intense and strong. “The opposites or antipathies” of winter were the “cold grays” or “the violent snow glare of the cold white sunshine, with its intense light and shade.” A schoolboy “scarcely knew what was meant by tone,” he recalled. Winter and summer, “were two hostile lives, and bred two separate natures.” Things were seen in terms of extremes, he would recall of his childhood in Massachusetts and as he reflected on the kind of people he grew up with. Passion and a keen sensitivity distinguished his fellow citizens.<sup>23</sup> Generosity and a caring for the poor were priorities, and one’s sense of duty was strong because winter was always coming. New England preacher Henry Ward Beecher, would add that “there was nothing a New Englander so nearly worships as an argument.”<sup>24</sup> Often such arguments, unresolved, would end up in a court of law. People who cherished long memories of such arguments and of injuries given or received in the attempt to win an argument or resolve a quarrel, would frequently carry a grudge. Blunt speech could anger and wound.

Direct or blunt speech prided itself on its honesty and willingness to speak truth and did not let diplomatic niceties or oversensitivity about others’ feelings get in the way. In Ellen White’s world, it was called “plain speech.” Methodist class meetings Ellen White attended in her teen years while growing up in Maine nurtured spiritual growth and encouraged such blunt communication. In time, the pattern of speech filtered into the whole of family and religious life. “Plain speech” had originated among the Quakers where it simply meant avoiding honorific titles, because everyone was believed to be on the same level in the eyes of God.<sup>25</sup> In Ellen White’s religious world, it morphed into an approach to conversation that was more concerned with being honest and frank even if feelings were hurt. In early Adventism the idea of “plain speech” also acquired the idea of reproofing and rebuking wrong and the individuals who were perceived as doing wrong. Often such corrections were made in public as a way of shaming individuals into changing their perceived attitude or behavior which an individual would then have to demonstrate by some public confession. It could be humiliating. Ellen White felt that a major part of her special ministry was reproofing and rebuking individuals both in private and in public if necessary. She often felt the need to give such rebuke because of a “burden” placed on her by God, and she could not be free from the sense of burden until the reproof had been delivered. In many situations she would write forcefully, with strong assertions.

Many found it helpful. Some, at times, felt the rebuke was based on wrong information; at other times it was too generalized to be helpful. She did not like

having to explain what she had meant after she had sent a letter. She had simply done her duty and communicated the “burden” given her of the Lord. It was the responsibility of the recipient to work out how the instruction applied. Sometimes recipients might request an interview to discuss exactly what she meant and how such counsel might work in practice as they explained the larger picture and the circumstances involved as seen from their perspective. She would find that she had to concede some points, even perhaps indicate she had misunderstood or had been misinformed. Then she would appeal to the overall, larger principle that had been the thrust of her burden in the message.<sup>26</sup> In such situations she feared that the testimony somehow lost its force.<sup>27</sup>

The culture of rebuking and admonishing undoubtedly nurtured spiritual growth in the Adventist community even as it required and developed attitudes of spiritual submission. But it also generated painful conflict, misunderstanding, and occasions when some individuals felt they were being abused. On one occasion the public rebuking of a colleague led to a lawsuit for libel against Ellen White and cautions from her co-leaders about taking care to avoid public circulation of criticism involving people’s reputations.<sup>28</sup> Understandably, this created ethical tensions. Public criticism had been part of a strategy to hold leaders to account. When others in the community also tried to broaden the practice, thinking they were following the scriptural injunction “to admonish one another,” it rarely worked as well as when the Whites did it.

James White, Ellen White’s husband, a deeply spiritual, effective writer and preacher, and a visionary entrepreneurial leader to whom the church is indebted, was also an autocratic leader whose temperament predisposed him to be a micro-manager. In his pastoral and work relationships he, too, was known for his “plain speech” in reprimanding others. Often in the midst of stress and anxiety over some church problem, when tired, harried, and exasperated, James White’s rebukes in public were sharp and harsh. He became known for “cutting and slashing” at his work colleagues and other church members. Ellen White would feel it important to defend her husband on such occasions, aware of the critical need the church had for his distinctive skills, and she would appeal for unity and submission to his leadership. Yet, she also lamented the effect that her husband’s attitudes and practices had on his colleagues, eating away at their self-confidence and causing them to back away from taking any initiative and leave all responsibility to James which only increased his load. Towards the end of his life, when his leadership became severely disabled by failing health, she became alarmed at the new generation of leaders who had begun to copy James’ style and manner. Not needing to defend him any longer she lamented, “The only reason that my husband’s influence today is not what God designed it should be is because he was not patient, kind and

forbearing." She grieved that "severity and too much dictation" had become "interwoven with his character" and had become a "habit." Colleagues cringed at "the many things he might say that savor of sharpness." It made it uncomfortably difficult for colleagues to work cooperatively with him.

New England "plain speech" had its downside as well as its pluses. Ellen White was shaped by and utilized these communication patterns that characterized her family and her childhood faith community, and the patterns came to shape her Adventist discourse. Ellen White grew up in a family and a community that could not avoid reflecting their New England culture which in turn had been influenced by its geography and its extremes in climate as well as by its social, religious, and political heritage. She was a New Englander. This did not diminish her gift, but it shaped and molded its expression and distinguished her approach to leadership throughout her life.

### THE "SUNNY" SIDE OF THE PICTURE

The attractively bound, thoughtfully produced autograph album presented as a gift to Ellen White when she left Australia in 1900 after nine years of incessant labor given to establishing Adventism in the South Pacific, provides heart-warming evidence that Ellen White was held in high esteem by her community. She was appreciated by her wider church community and by her local neighbors in the small town of Cooranbong, among whom she had lived for the previous five years. Entries expressed good wishes and conveyed affection. She was deeply and sincerely appreciated by Adventists and non-Adventists alike for her personal warmth and empathy, her caring attitude for others, and her generosity. Marian de Berg, in her book, *Stories from Sunnyside* (2017) relates many affirming anecdotes from White's time in Cooranbong. She tells, for example, of Ellen White returning to a Sydney church to preach on a third and a fourth occasion and being surrounded by church members after the service, with some pressing elaborate floral bouquets upon her.<sup>29</sup>

Adventists are familiar with this positive, brightly-hued picture of "the human side" of Ellen White. It is an authentic, impressive picture of a respected widow, a daring entrepreneur, and a community builder-cum-church-planter as well as a compassionate, caring neighbor. In this picture frame we find an Ellen White who is spontaneously generous—and not just because she saw it as a Christian duty. She describes herself as being "pained in the heart" at the plight and the abject poverty of some of her Cooranbong neighbors living further out in the bush. We glimpse her offering food and work to the "tramps" or "swagmen" who came to her door during a time of economic depression in the mid-1890s. They would be given a day's work chopping her firewood and offered a loaf of fresh bread as they left. But she would also discriminate between the "worthy poor" and those who were

indolent—even if there was nothing for them to do. She might give one cow to her poor neighbors in Cooranbong, while to another family she might lend a milking cow with the expectation that it would be given back. She would share fruit and vegetables from her garden and would frequently give away clothes or have them made up by her own seamstress out of new bolts of material, to clothe families even as she would have her seamstress patch her own clothing. She would also generously give cash or make pledges for the support of charitable causes that kept appearing—new church buildings, new institutions, neighbors in need, ministers in need. She would borrow funds to give to a project, or to set an example for others to support it with their gifts. At the same time, she knew how to use her generosity as a strategy in her leadership. On occasion she would borrow money to make a donation to ensure the success of a project and prompt others into giving. Ellen White could use her financial support to get her way on a project, so her generosity was not just a simple matter of being charitable. It often had a tactical purpose.

Ellen White's abundant generosity also manifested itself in hospitality. She welcomed visitors to her table warmly. Her meal tables always had additional seats. And although she did not present as a raconteur with a flow of entertaining stories, she was nevertheless the gracious host, the leader of the table conversation, making people feel comfortable and drawing them into the conversation, enquiring of her guests and offering perspectives and anecdotes of her own. Sarah Peck, a longtime participant in the table conversations, said that "Ellen White was the soul of hospitality." Her daughter-in-law, May Lacey White, recalled her as "a very pleasant hostess" who "always had something to say, all the time."

She was also sociable, relating warmly and cheerfully to people, particularly to her grandchildren. She took an interest in others, deeply concerned for their spiritual welfare and their happiness. And she cared when people were not well. She readily identified with those suffering ill health or who had been injured in accidents. But she was not given to making public display of her emotions. From childhood she had kept a tight rein on her emotions and did not like to let herself be seen crying. She did not like saying farewell to people for fear her tears would flow. For this reason, she was glad she had not seen J. N. Andrews as he left for Europe. She shed no tears at her husband's funeral. And yet she projected empathy. She looked straight at you when she was talking to you, and you felt important. It was this quality that made her an effective revivalist preacher. People felt she was talking directly to them. She projected a keen sense of the importance of the existential now for decision making. Her awareness that God had given her a unique gift—a charisma recognized by her community—reinforced the power of her preaching.

Ellen White shared with her husband a strong entrepreneurial gift. She was a builder by nature, a risktaker, and she believed that opportunities for church

development or evangelistic outreach had to be taken when they came and that sometimes the opportunity had to be created. Not all her denominational building projects survived, even though she may have invoked prophetic authority to establish them. But in the main, her entrepreneurship and risk-taking were an enormous blessing to the church and its development.

Another aspect of her risk-taking spirit was reflected in her not being intimidated by the prospect of adventure. For example, even in her sixties she was willing to rough it, living in a tent for several months while her house was being built, using an outdoor “long-drop” toilet, planting her own garden, and running several milk cows. She could move house readily and had to do so often. In her middle years, she had ridden a pony and traveled with her husband’s wagon train through Texas. This was not always done without complaint, but when uncomfortable travel seemed to be duty, she gritted her teeth and bore it. In this sense she was what might be called “gutsy.” She had the ability to be flexible and to rough it. She was not put off by spiders or other creepy crawlers. But there was a flip side to this. She was, in fact, a “high maintenance” person by temperament and because of her public role. In many ways, she was quite dependent. More on this later.

Ellen White’s claim to her special charisma, described in the New Testament as “the gift of prophecy” was affirmed by her colleagues and her community when they saw that the gift gave her insight into people and their motives, into spiritual matters, and into matters that affected the health and wellbeing of the church she helped establish. But there was also a certain natural charisma expressed through her personality. She inspired confidence, drew people to her, and attracted workers who became loyal to her. People were comfortable staying in her home, travelling with her in difficult circumstances, and working under her direction. Of course, her helpers believed in her “cause,” the mission of the church and were committed to that larger purpose, but Ellen White had a personality that went beyond this. She was interested in others and was highly empathetic, conveying warmth and the ability to listen. She was also competent and persuasive in communication and inspired loyalty. Women like Marian Davis and Sarah McEnterfer stayed with her for long periods and gave long service. Men like Clarence Crisler and Dores Robinson, who served on her staff for extended periods, found that working for her gave a deep sense of fulfilment and meaning. But if her personality easily drew people into conversation with her about their families, their work, the progress of the “cause,” or the status of their spiritual journey, it did so with a sense of seriousness. Her granddaughter, Ella Robinson, recalled that her grandmother “could laugh heartily” at a humorous incident when things went awry, would enjoy innocent teasing or gentle banter at the table, and was known for her cheerful demeanor.<sup>30</sup> But if she could laugh out loud, as her granddaughter attests, it is hard to find that

characterization anywhere else beyond Ella's affirmation. George Knight relates several anecdotes as evidence of Ellen White's "healthy sense of humor," but he had to look hard to find them.<sup>31</sup> Humor was not as strong a feature of her social interaction as was the need for serious piety and attendance to duty.

### THE FLIPSIDE

Telling jokes or relating humorous anecdotes in the style of an Abraham Lincoln to lighten tension or make a memorable point was not in the repertoire of Ellen White's communication skills. Neither was there time anywhere in her personal schedule or in her family routines for what Adventist families today would call recreation other than perhaps going out for an occasional sightseeing ride which she really enjoyed. The Methodist Episcopal Church of her childhood forbade the singing of any songs or reading any books which did "not tend to the knowledge or love of God." All of life had to focus on religion. Activities like dancing, games of chance, football, baseball, and other games and amusements were forbidden. In the strict implementation of these rules there was no room for table games, parlor games, Saturday night "social" evenings or "parties." Such activities were "worldly, frivolous entertainment," the kind of "gatherings for pleasure" which would inevitably "eclipse the light of heaven" and separate souls from God.<sup>32</sup> Organized sports and outdoor games fell into the same category.

Ellen White relates that in her childhood home as she was growing up, she would have "times, now and then for amusement" but "there was no idleness in my home." This was a strong New England cultural value. There were always chores and duties to attend to, and they took priority. The focus on the seriousness of attending to duty and not wasting time was deeply embedded in the culture of her Methodist home. She could recall that on occasion when she had been "told to do something," she would "speak words of complaint," and "go out of the room." (Did she shut the door loudly?) Her mother would call her back and ask her to repeat what she had said and then seriously labor with her to have her see that she "was a part of the family, a part of the firm" and that it was her duty to carry her part. Her mother would "carry that right out to the letter." There was no disobedience "that was not taken in hand at once."<sup>33</sup> When her family responded to the preaching of William Miller and his prediction that the second advent with its terrible end-of-the-world judgment was going to take place very soon, the concept of being busy with one's duties and not wasting time in "frivolous" amusements was strongly reinforced. That set of values never changed, and throughout her life, "amusements" were always viewed negatively, disallowed on college campuses and at sanitariums, and discouraged in families. "The day of God is right upon us," she would cite as a reason for her opposition to "gatherings for pleasure" at the St. Helena Sanitarium in 1901.<sup>34</sup>

James shared this Puritan animosity to “amusements,” and they shaped his own life just as strongly. He reinforced them at home and at work. But there was a decided downside to this discomfort with “amusement.”

James relates that late one warm Friday afternoon when walking by the river back home from the publishing office, his attention was taken by some apprentices, including his son Edson, using a long rope in a tall tree swinging out over the river and plunging into the cool water with a great deal of laughter. This was after a long week in the publishing house with days that began at 7.00 a.m. and finished at 6.00 p.m. Unseen by the teenagers and disturbed by their loud laughter and joking, he took himself off deeper into the woods where privately he knelt in prayer, lamenting the boys’ wasting precious time engaging in such merriment, and pleading with God for their salvation.

Life was deadly serious for Ellen White. All must face the judgment. This perspective shaped her life and was the reason for her extensive travel in the proclamation of the last message of warning of judgment to come. “The Lord knows that we did not come across the great ocean to see the country, or for our amusement,” she wrote on arrival in Sydney in 1891.<sup>35</sup> In Europe she would notice and admire scenery, taking in the lofty mountain ranges, and she would visit sites of religious history where faithful reformers of old had labored and suffered in upholding truth. But other unique aspects of European culture, such as art galleries where she might see a Rembrandt or a Brueghel, and museums where she might see some historically significant artifact would not register on her radar. In Hawaii, on a one-day stopover enroute to Australia, she would notice the palm trees and “grand scenery,” and in a brief stop at Samoa, she would notice the “elaborately tattooed” men in the canoes who brought tropical fruit out to their ship. In New Zealand she would admire the grand forests and dramatic hill country north of Auckland and admire the coastline and harbors from the deck of a coastal steamer. But there is no record of her visiting a Māori Marae or enquiring about the meaning of Māori carvings or Māori songs. Her letters and diaries of the period do not mention even a visit to the nation’s small, but impressive, Parliament House which was only a block or so away from where she stayed in Wellington. In Australia where she spent the large part of a decade, she would comment on the grandeur of the giant eucalypts that crowded the land where the college was established, but she never attended a concert in a town hall, or a cricket match as a way of understanding the culture. The crowds she saw from her rail carriage window making their way to a cricket game in Sydney were, in her view, on their way to perdition.

This New England concentration on duty and disapproval of amusement was strengthened even further in Ellen White’s worldview by her sharp focus on the imminence of the Advent and the time of judgment. This created severe tensions

for teachers who had the care of energetic students, for example, in the early days at Avondale when she banned ball games. It is an illustrative episode. Her stern, duty-constrained, New England culture clashed uncomfortably with that of Australia's culture of enjoying outdoor team sports inherited from old England.

On Wednesday April 11, 1900, as a way of marking the first anniversary of the completion of the college building program which had involved much student labor, American principal Cassius. B. Hughes, with his staff, planned a rare day off from classes for the students to enjoy a recreation day together. They thought they were implementing Ellen White's counsel that teachers should make opportunities to engage socially with their students, "play" with them and identify with their interests. The day was planned with chapel exercises in the morning at which Ellen White and others would speak, and the afternoon would be spent in games. The staff had put a small amount of personal funds together to buy tennis nets and some racquets for the girls and were setting out the lines for the courts when Ellen White drove up in her carriage for her chapel talks. She said nothing at the time, and with religious exercises concluded and a lunch enjoyed, the afternoon turned to recreation. The girls played tennis together on the lawn, and the boys enjoyed a cricket game. Teachers and principal Hughes joined in the ball games to the pleasant satisfaction of all. The following day, however, a much-agitated Ellen White called the faculty together at their morning meeting to strongly rebuke them for wasting time in such "amusements," and then the next day she spoke to the students in chapel giving a similar dressing down. She then wrote to the school board censuring it sharply for allowing such wasteful frivolity. "Games and amusements" were "the curse of the Colonies" she asserted and "they must not be allowed in our school here."<sup>36</sup> The board took action to enforce the policy, and teachers reluctantly (sullenly) sold the tennis and cricket equipment.

Principal Hughes, who was aware that Ellen White had protested against students being allowed to play rugby-type football at Battle Creek College six years earlier because it was viewed as a school of brutality, had not allowed the students to engage in that sport. But his understanding was that the genteel games of tennis and cricket were appropriate. He felt strongly that Ellen White was acting "rashly" and taking things to "an unnecessary extreme," and he struggled to avoid responding with hostility to the intervention. Acting as a go-between, Sarah Peck on Ellen White's editorial staff explained that Ellen White's concession of entering into play with simple ball games was for elementary children. Hughes had teenagers at the college. He allowed the storm to pass and resolved to submit graciously to the rebuke and the prohibition. As he searched Scripture, seeking to find a reason for such a ban and to make sense of the logic of the proscription, he found himself having to adopt an extreme rationale that all sport or recreational competition of

any kind must be bad, because it involved winners and losers. In his further educational leadership appointments in America, he would not allow any games or amusements. Students were to study and work.<sup>37</sup>

The kind of recreational day Ellen White saw as profitable was one that was completely free of “jesting and joking” which is what she had observed about the Sunday picnic day held for the Review and Herald Publishing House employees at Goguac Lake near Battle Creek thirty years earlier in April 1870. Temperance speeches occupied the morning, and singing and testimonies the afternoon. There were no games or lighthearted banter. Uriah Smith reported in the *Review* that the day had been a success, because there was a “gratifying absence of fun.”<sup>38</sup> Ellen White’s intense and serious disposition, her New England cultural heritage, and her spiritual convictions defined her sense of what was appropriate humor. She could not bear the thought of frivolity, let alone what might seem like unrestrained rau-  
cous laughter.

New England and her parental inheritance also endowed Ellen White with what Merlin Burt notes was “an independent turn of mind.”<sup>39</sup> This temperamental trait of developing strong conviction reinforced by a firm spirit of determination was demonstrated early in her life when as a child she would walk away from her mother complaining after being told to do something she did not want to do or thought was unfair. As already noted, her mother would challenge her and in a firm confrontation make her repeat what she had said and then insist that all members of the family needed to help with the chores. Ellen’s spirit of strong determination, when she thought she was right, also became evident when she insisted that she wanted to be baptized by immersion when other women in her church circle sought to persuade her that sprinkling was quite acceptable. Her pastor baptized her by immersion at a beach on Portland Bay. Sometime later in the flush of her new enthusiasm of having experienced what Methodists called the “second blessing” (a deeper experience of sanctification), she embarked on an endeavor to lead her young women friends at church to this same deeper sanctification experience which she regarded as the “true conversion.” Many “did not heed my entreaties,” she recalled. But in the face of resistance and ignoring a concern that she was “too zealous,” she “determined” with tenacity and persistence, not to cease her efforts till all had “yielded.” All but one did.<sup>40</sup> Such strong-willed tenacity and perseverance would later make her a highly effective leader, gain her the respect of her clerical colleagues, and enhance her ministry among the struggling Advent churches. The determined will, underscored by deepening spiritual understanding, helped her overcome adversity and the curtailing of her education following a childhood facial injury. For this, it became a great plus. As George Knight observes about later evidence of the trait, it also enabled Ellen, tenaciously, against the odds and the advice

of others, to adopt and persist with a self-designed innovative treatment regime for her husband that would bring him back to health after his severe disabling stroke in 1865.<sup>41</sup>

On the flip side, this valuable leadership attribute could at times cross over into unyielding stubbornness with a negative impact on her relationship to her equally strong-willed, but also autocratic and irascible, husband James. Their opinions and convictions frequently collided, particularly after James' stroke, and in the exchange of sharp rejoinders, hurtful accusations would be made and offense taken. On some days, Ellen would find herself resorting to the "silent treatment." And she could go all day without speaking, sometimes longer—though they might ride together all day in the same phaeton. This was when she felt hurt by some sharp words he had flung at her, and he needed to apologize first. At times, she would stay home from church she was so "sad and dispirited" and out of sorts with her domineering husband.<sup>42</sup> On many occasions she felt she had to give in to James' judgment, and that was difficult. At other times, she insisted on her view of things despite his vigorous objection to what he perceived as her effort to tell him how to order his life. To a significant degree, the White marriage was a case of elbowed living.<sup>43</sup> The relationship endured because of a deep spiritual commitment to each other and a willingness to walk in the woods behind their house to talk things through, apologize, and join in prayer together.

This strong-willed dimension of her temperament also becomes evident in the occasional times when Ellen White would lock horns with others over rather inconsequential things. She would have quite a quarrel with the Irish-New Zealander Metcalfe Hare, the obstinate builder and designer who thought the Avondale Village Church building should be erected in a certain location. She was determined that the church be built in another location close by. In the long view it didn't really matter. Furthermore, sometimes projects she felt determined to establish failed to survive because of poor location or poor timing. The fifteen-room Avondale Health Retreat, established in 1900 at Ellen White's determined insistence, served its community for a very short time. It had been built to ease the pressure of demands for care being provided by her own nurse at her own home in the bush. While it demonstrated well Ellen White's vision of a comprehensive approach to health and wellbeing, it was a commercial failure from the start and "quickly proved to be a white elephant."<sup>44</sup> The clientele base was too sparse and too poor to afford care. The construction of the much larger and better placed sanitarium on the prosperous edge of Sydney just two years later, provided competition for existing clientele. The Health Retreat struggled on for a few years with talented doctors, but in 1907 the building was converted into accommodations for students at the college and later into rental apartments before being demolished in 1934. Its placement, out of

alignment to the roadway, always looked awkward and odd, but had been chosen because Ellen White had insisted that rooms needed to catch the sun.

The Sanitarium established in Nashville, Tennessee also did not succeed. Begun in 1904 and enlarged in 1905 with substantial financial investment at the relentless urging of Ellen White, the institution lasted only nine years. Jerry Moon reports that because of “its failure from the very first to pay expenses” and its increasing debt load each year it was closed in 1913.<sup>45</sup> That was perhaps inevitable, and visionary entrepreneurs know that some projects take off, and others do not. Sanitariums in Southern California survived spectacularly. Ellen White’s vision for wholistic health care, necessarily adapted to new environments in the twenty-first century, continues to extend the mission of the church.

### FITTED FOR A MINISTRY OF REPROOF

If the circumstances of Ellen White’s baptism in mid-1842 evidenced a strong-willed determination in her temperament, it also revealed another underlying dimension to her temperament. Did she inherit an attribute nurtured by her Methodist class-meeting practice that encouraged confession of sin and admonishing of faults and sins in oneself and in others? While the practice was designed to nurture contrition and sanctified discipline, did it also inadvertently cultivate an unconscious sense of spiritual superiority and a propensity to judge and notice faults in others? Did this become one of her “besetting” sins?

William Miller’s first preaching season in Portland in 1840 had heightened Ellen’s sense of spiritual inadequacy and the conviction she was unready for the judgment. This was a period when she was already struggling with a sense of adolescent inferiority and lack of self-esteem due to the way others and she herself reacted to the damaging and lasting effects of her facial injury. The message of the imminent advent exacerbated her depressing sense of guilt before God and her lack of sanctification, although her experience at a revivalist Methodist camp at Exeter, New Hampshire a year later helped diminish these fears even as it created an intense desire for greater holiness. As she stood beside a newly baptized church “sister” on the day they were both welcomed into church fellowship after their baptism, fourteen-year-old Ellen was very conscious of her companion’s contrasting attire. At the recent camp meeting at Exeter, Ellen had “resolved to give herself unreservedly to the Lord” and for her, that implied that she should “be plain in my dress.” She felt “no disposition” anymore “to dress like the world.” That was some sacrifice, given that the Harmon family ran a hat-making business which meant studying and following current fashions rather closely. But “plain dress” became Ellen White’s own personal testing truth—the issue which she determined would evidence whether she was truly committed to the Christian life or not. In church that day

she noted that her new “sister” in the faith wore jewelry, rings on her fingers, earrings, and a bonnet decked with “artificial flowers” and trimmed with “costly ribbons.” Her first reaction was to feel sad and unhappy that the pastor had not called out the girl and given her some reproof. For some time afterward, the lack of reproof for the young woman put her “in deep trial.”<sup>46</sup> Why had no reproof come from the minister? Wasn’t dressing like the world sinful? With youthful zeal, she resolved that she would be faithful in not dressing like the world, whether the pastor did his duty or not. “It seemed to me that we had better be humbling ourselves in the dust, for our sins and transgressions were so great that God gave his only beloved Son to die for us.” As we have already noticed, following her baptism she actively sought the “conversion” of both young and older women friends at her Methodist church.

Sensing a “burden” from God to reprove and admonish failure and sin in others, she found herself employing reproof as a way of strengthening and building up the loyal but struggling Sabbatarian Adventist community in the post-1844 years. This approach became the distinctive hallmark of her ministry as a “messenger of the Lord.” She believed God had especially gifted her and strengthened her for this kind of work. The nature of her visionary experiences and her insights from them proved helpful to her fellow believers and validated her experience. As Theodore Levterov notes, for early Adventists, the helpfulness of such counsel, though uncomfortable, validated the authenticity of this aspect of her role.<sup>47</sup> All through her ministry, “plain speaking” featured in her work. Colleagues, like John Andrews, would sometimes have to defend the value of this dimension in her ministry against sustained attack. In 1869, James would advertise camp meeting as being only for those who could “endure” such “plain speaking.” Such camps were “a poor place for invalids and small children.”<sup>48</sup> Robust spirituality was required. In the 1870s James would boast about his own reputation for sharp plain speech.

Readers of Ellen White’s correspondence in the 1890s have noticed a distinctive “passionate, provocative intensity” in her writing when she exercised her “messenger” role in admonishing church leaders, quite in contrast to earlier periods. Arthur White, her grandson, notes that the letters and manuscripts are “extensive in volume” and reflect a “dramatic” change in tone. Recipients of her letters in this period encountered an Ellen White who is unsparing in tone, “severe” in her terminology, and frequently hyperbolic in her language.<sup>49</sup> Like many an Old Testament prophet, Ellen White became frustrated with flawed leaders to the point of anger, an emotion which is perhaps easier on Adventist ears if expressed by the euphemism, “highly indignant.” The euphemisms Ellen White sometimes used to express how frustrated she could get included, “my spirit burns within me,” and “when my spirit was stirred.” During the last decade of the century, she describes church or publishing house problems in stark, threatening, black-and-white contrasts, and often lays the

blame on an individual when oftentimes the problems were systemic and organizational and the leader's hands were tied. In seeking to apply White's admonitions, written to correct specific problems or to correct later problems under different circumstances, it is important to mind Ellen White's own advice and consider the "time and place" of the problems being addressed. It is equally as important to also understand the "time and place" of the author when she was writing such admonitions. Context and circumstances of the author's time and location can serve as an interpretive guide. As I note in the final chapter of *The Prophet and the Presidents*, personal factors of hypersensitivity, elevated blood pressure, severe personal financial embarrassment, and its associated anxiety and stress, intensified by chronic insomnia and complicated by crossed letters and misunderstood communications all factor into Ellen White's perceptions of problems and inevitably influence the tone in which they are described and addressed.<sup>50</sup> Such stress factors enormously perplexed and worried the strong-willed, determined, and plain spoken New Englander trying to establish the church in a foreign land. Temperamental propensities become pronounced under such stress, and patience wears thin—"Why could problems not be solved by quickly firing incompetent leadership?" "If only someone more competent and spiritually alive could be found and was willing to take charge."

This is not to overlook or diminish the real and serious problems that afflicted church leadership and the increasingly inadequate organizational denominational structure that served the church in the 1890s. Out of this complexity, the perceiving of problems, the discerning of solutions, and the giving of admonition reflected more than just inspired insights from Ellen White's dreams. Her messages were expressed by a very real New Englander shaped by temperament and culture and living in very complex circumstances.

## A SENSITIVE SOUL

Another important dimension of temperament that molded and shaped Ellen White's life experience and gave texture and tone to her counsel is what she described as her emotional sensitivity. From her earliest childhood years, Ellen White understood herself as a person who felt things intensely. It was just how she had been wired. "My life was often miserable for my feelings were keenly sensitive," she recalled of her childhood remembering that she often wished she could "weep things out" like her twin sister Elizabeth when she would get upset or distressed. But she was different. She couldn't weep. She would bottle up emotions and become melancholic. Sometimes she would experience physical collapse from the stress of the intense churning of thoughts and emotion. For example, she reports that in her early teen years she would withdraw into herself and anguish over her loss of friends who could not relate easily to her facial disfigurement. "Deep despair" would

envelope her for extended periods. Around this time, an intense nightmare about not being saved woke her up in such terror that she could remember the raw horror of it twenty years later in vivid detail. In her mid-teen years as she moved beyond the distress of the childhood accident and grew spiritually, the intensity of her sensitivity was deeply influenced by the spiritual fervor generated by William Miller's preaching. She now sometimes found herself at prayer meetings giving a personal testimony with "choked utterance" and "tearful eyes." She experienced spiritual conviction so intensely at times she would find herself prostrate on the floor in total physical and emotional collapse which she described as losing her strength. "I was much blessed and again lost my strength," became a recurrent experience during this period.<sup>51</sup> Interpreted within her religious culture as being "prostrated by the power of God," the experience of becoming unconscious was also sometimes referred to as being "slain in the spirit." She would experience such spiritual and emotional overload frequently during her mid-to-late teens and this continued into the period following the trauma of the great disappointment.

In later life as an adult, this inheritance of an intense sensitivity would sometimes trigger a complete physical collapse when she received bad news or experienced intense anxiety over a conflict of some kind or became consumed by excessive worry. At such times she could be physically disabled—sometimes for days afterward. "A burden" of anxiety about some circumstance or the welfare of a group of people would eat her up. She sometimes wrote of experiencing this intensity as descending on her with "overwhelming force" in a way that threatened to "consume" her. "If I can avoid these pressing agonizing thoughts on behalf of souls, I shall preserve my strength better" she reflected to a female confidant.<sup>52</sup> Her extreme response to reading an article in the *Review* in 1894 helps illustrate this dimension of her temperament.

Ellen White was acutely conscious of the deep community prejudice against her American church as she struggled to establish congregations and a college in colonial Australia in the 1890s. The strong ties of the colony's churches to the established traditional churches of old England, the mother country, made evangelism difficult. The reputation and credibility of her new movement and its spokespersons mattered a great deal. When in May 1894, she read a pair of articles in the *Review and Herald*, that recounted early Adventist involvement in fanaticism in New England and warned of the continuing dangers of religious extremism, she reacted instinctively.<sup>53</sup> As she read the articles, she immediately saw them as potentially discrediting and undoing much of her own hard work to establish the credibility of Adventism in her adopted mission field.

W. H. Littlejohn, author of the articles, had broadly traced the occurrence of "extreme views" across Christian history, including an extended reference to the

fanaticism of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and cited an extreme example of “extravagant” behavior.<sup>54</sup> Then Littlejohn proceeded to assert that “the great Advent movement of 1844 also was by no means free from extreme tendencies,” although he qualified the assertion by clarifying that “the body as a whole” was “comparatively exempt” from fanaticism. In support of his assertion, he quoted Joshua Himes’ celebrated observation that in Maine in the time before 1844, “fanaticism was seven feet deep.” He observed that Himes was undoubtedly exaggerating in this memorable quip, but there was, nevertheless, a large kernel of truth in his assertion. Littlejohn observed that for his readers he would let “the curtain drop” on the messy “facts and incidents” known to him, “to spare the feelings of many good people still living.” He was glad indeed that “of late years,” the history of Adventists had “been quite free of extreme acts or views” and that they had been gradually “lifting out of the extravagant notions which marred their early history.”<sup>55</sup> The immediate 1894 context that apparently prompted Littlejohn to write his warning of extreme positions appears to have been the commencing of a short period of intense eschatological expectation in Battle Creek and the appearance again of a young woman, Anna Phillips, experiencing visions and persuading some leaders of her genuineness. Ellen White’s own writing had apparently helped spark the new bout of apocalyptic fervor.<sup>56</sup>

The content in Littlejohn’s articles generated deep anxiety and distress in Ellen White as she reflected on what new converts in Australia might think of his reporting of early Adventist excesses. After reading the articles, she reported later that during the night she felt herself descend into “an agony of distress both of mind and body” and feared that she would not live.<sup>57</sup> For two days following she could not write or do anything because her “feelings were so intense” and she was unable to sleep. She “felt crushed as a cart beneath the sheaves.” She would complain about this to Littlejohn some weeks later and blame him for it after she had recovered her equilibrium. She anguished, because she feared the reaction her prospective converts would have in reading such reports of fanaticism in the *Review*. Did she also anguish over whether her own expressions had inadvertently provoked the outbreak in Battle Creek? Did she also perhaps recall her own difficult and ambiguous involvement in the early religious enthusiasm—getting caught up in it and then opposing it? Did she recall how for long years afterwards she had to bear the stain and taint of it and work strenuously to overcome the prejudice against her movement because of it? Now she would have to go to the trouble and “put forth labor” to find material to vindicate the pioneers of the movement and its present ministry.<sup>58</sup>

A similar extreme physical response to emotional stress occurred in 1898 when an inter-personal conflict between workers broke out in the North Fitzroy church in Melbourne, Australia. Ellen White “suffered such agony of soul,” becoming so

intensely distressed it made her physically sick with vomiting and headaches and an inability to sleep more than two hours a night for a time—a response possibly exacerbated by anxiety-induced high blood pressure. Feeling things deeply on this occasion, she worried through the night, not seeing any solution until “light came to me in the night season.”<sup>59</sup> Worrying intensely with a mind churning and not being able to let things go was an innate part of who Ellen White was and contributed to her chronic insomnia. At times, she would interpret this as being “awakened in the night by an angel” prompting her to get up and write. Writing during the day would have been more healthful. In reality, it seems, much of her inability to sleep had its roots in temperament and physiology. After speaking publicly at night, she would find that her mind would not shut off, and she couldn’t sleep. She would lie awake for hours worrying about finances, hers and the church’s. She understood about the side effects of insomnia and would counsel others to fix the problem. But she could not fix her own, and to some extent the insomnia would result at times in a measure of irritability and seeing things in dramatic dark colors. Things always look worse during the night, as the physical darkness exaggerates a situation’s bleakness.

A side effect of Ellen White’s inherited heightened sensitivity was that it contributed to her being “a high maintenance” person. Finding a place away from the noise of the dining room on a boat, a place on the train away from people who were smoking, a place out of the wind while travelling on the deck of a coastal steamer—all required the special attention and extra labors of a bevy of personal attendants. Her daughter-in-law, May Lacey White, reports that when she was Ellen’s personal assistant, she would spend twenty minutes a night combing out the sixty-eight-year-old widow’s hair, helping her with her bath, and then provide an evening hour of massage before putting her to bed—all this to help her mother-in-law sleep better. Ellen White’s schedule was only rarely free from the demands of writing, preaching, counselling, travelling, or entertaining, and there was always much to be done around her house and office in order to release her for her ministry activities. But the needs of a high-maintenance temperament, sensitive about many things, added layers to the need for multiple helpers on her household staff, especially in her later years, including her son as her full-time publishing agent, a nurse, cook, housekeeper, a personal assistant or two, as well as several editorial personnel.

Elevated sensitivity undoubtedly enhanced the effectiveness and power of Ellen White’s ministry and the special role she experienced as God’s “messenger.” And from a providential perspective, this strand in her temperament could perhaps help to explain why God would choose a person like Ellen White for her particular ministry. But the trait also complicated personal relationships. A highly sensitive

nature with a finely sharpened personal sense of what was right and necessary in any situation could more easily take offense at perceived wrongs or at slights intended or unintended. In the earliest years of her ministry, for example, in times of desperate poverty and struggle, if friends and neighbors did not see their way to personally assist Ellen White or her husband in the way she thought they should, the failure could be interpreted as a major spiritual failing and the offense taken would be remembered for years afterwards. The New England cultural and temperamental trait of carrying a grudge was not confined in the White family to just Ellen's husband, for which she gave him repeated reproof. What is it that lies behind the not being able to forgive and forget? Is remembering a perceived or actual offense long years afterwards, rooted in the sense that one is sure one is absolutely right, together with a keen sense of fairness and justice from a very personal perspective? It probably also is allied to a propensity to project onto another a bad motive or a negative reason for doing something that negatively affects the wronged one. Ellen White would not be unlike many of her peers if at times she was able to more clearly see in others what she could not see so easily in herself.

From this distance, it is not possible to untangle the complicated relationships between Ellen White and her Paris Hill neighbors, the Stevens sisters—Harriet (married to Uriah Smith), Angeline, (married to John N. Andrews), and Paulina—but there are temperament and social dynamics that lie underneath the spiritual issues. Subconscious personal jealousies and misinterpretations of motives led to offence being taken, even though apparently not purposely given, and the sense of hurt could stretch over decades. In 1860, both Angeline and Paulina Stevens tried to remember offenses they may have given Ellen White a decade earlier in Paris Hill that seemed to have permanently destroyed her confidence in them. The possible faults they tried to recall which may have given offense included not lending a mirror or sofa in time of need or declining a request to stay with the White family to help with household duties. When an offense is remembered with feeling a decade later and still requires an apology and a confession, the sensitivity underlying such offended feelings is finely edged and fragile.<sup>60</sup> Ellen and James both struggled with this part of their cultural and social inheritance, and it affected and complicated their ministries at times. The social dynamics are complex and get mixed up with perceptions of spirituality. Sometimes letters written out of this complicated, complex interweaving of human sensitivity and a conviction of a “burden” from the Lord could result in the infliction of pain. Such letters could be cruel even as the author sought to be both kind and truthful.<sup>61</sup>

In conclusion, it is evident from a close reading of the abundance of new documentary evidence on Ellen White that there is indeed much more about her that we did not know before. In the full rounded 360-degree perspective, we see an Ellen

White whose unique gift in the church helped to keep the community together, grow spiritually, enlarge its understanding of its expanding mission, and broaden its grasp of present truth. That same all-round view reveals more of the details that constituted Ellen White's full humanity with its unique strengths and weaknesses, manifesting its New England eccentricities and its distinctive temperament. Could it be otherwise, given our understanding of the way God reaches out to humanity incarnationally? This wider 360-degree perspective also needs to be included in the broadened understanding of the "time and place" principles of interpretation so necessary to understanding her writings.

If Ellen White's plain speech elicited repentance and reformation in many individuals and congregations, her intensity in such speech could also hurt and injure others, cause further confusion and conflict, or intimidate a recipient, producing only "sorrow of heart, but not reform."<sup>62</sup> And sometimes, through misunderstanding, plain speech could produce allegations that did not cohere with the facts. On occasion, the "burden" for correction and change could be felt so strongly and yet expressed so obscurely that the counsel produced confusion and conflict rather than a clear way forward. Ellen White would sometimes lament this and resolve to write less.<sup>63</sup> If her strong, determined will could help expand the church's vision and keep it together, it could also lead the movement into frustrating cul-de-sacs. Such was inevitable when a young nineteenth-century woman drawn from generations of hard-wintered New Englanders, framed with a keenly sensitive disposition and a deep spirituality, responded to a call she heard from her Lord to help a disappointed "little flock" hold on to its hope, grasp new truths, and discover that the movement was meant to be a blessing to a world in desperate need of hope and meaning.

MESSENDER WITH A NEW ENGLAND STYLE

PART TWO

# How to Read Ellen White

*“In the contemplation of Christ, we linger on the shore  
of a love that is measureless.”*

—Ellen G. White

*“We will have to look for prophetic coherence not in what the  
prophet says, but of Whom he speaks.”*

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE PROPHET AS PREACHER

Paul E. McGraw

**M**ost Seventh-day Adventists have never heard the name of Claude Holmes. Though he was not a pastor or an administrator or a scholar, Holmes has shaped—*distorted*, really—our discussions of Ellen G. White for more than a century. A Linotype operator at the Review and Herald publishing house, Holmes asked in a 1917 tract, “Have We an Infallible Spirit of Prophecy?” After the 1919 Bible Conference, he sought to discredit General Conference president, A. G. Daniells, and anyone else who tried to qualify, however cautiously, Adventist claims for her writing. Any attempt to place Ellen White in historical context or describe change over time in her teachings, Holmes rejected as treason—a betrayal of “the Spirit of Prophecy.”

In effect, the denomination was offered a clear, simple, and false choice—either accept Ellen White’s life and words as infallible or “renounce” her as the influential critic and one-time Adventist minister, Dudley M. Canright, had done.

The hypothetical choice between Canright and Holmes has distracted us ever since. Even today, it gets in the way of understanding the real message and methods of a remarkable prophetic leader. If we are to reclaim the legacy of Ellen White in the twenty-first century, we might begin by noticing that she was, among other important roles, a highly effective preacher. Behind a physical pulpit or a metaphorical one in her articles, letters, books, and sermons she approached the Bible as a guide to action, a lesson book for practical living. As she rebuked error, proclaimed an imminent end, and encouraged building schools and hospitals, she had the mindset and techniques of a homilist. She wrote in many modes, of course, but this one is central to any accurate understanding of her work.

Some perceptive leaders would argue (in the words of my first union conference president, Elder Harold Lee), “For far too long, we have allowed evangelists to set our theology.” This is true, as far as it goes, but one could go even further. For far too long we have allowed our opponents to set the agenda regarding Ellen White, fearful that any concessions or corrections will lead some people to conclude that a prophet

who changes or grows is not a “true prophet” at all. It is time to move from dogged defense to a more aggressive and accurate approach. In the process, we might revive the Adventist concept of “progressive revelation,” the openness to new light that distinguished us, we have claimed, from the stagnant established churches.

### A HOMILIST, NOT AN EXEGETE

Almost five decades ago, an Adventist Bible teacher pointed us in the direction of the prophet-as-preacher. In an article entitled, “Ellen White’s Authority as Bible Commentator,” Joseph J. Battistone of Andrews University made an insightful comment that has been long neglected. Ellen White, he wrote, “was more interested in relating the practical results of the prophetic preaching than in explaining the theological significance of the actual messages. Consequently, her writings tend to be more homiletical than exegetical.” That is, she was a preacher who was interested in application, not theory, behavior instead of technical nuances. One could say that her words were more like the Gospel of John than John Calvin’s *Institutes*. This is particularly true when she writes narratives on biblical stories.

Battistone was not alone in making this point. C. C. Crisler, one of Ellen White’s valued literary assistants, made a similar point in a letter to M. C. Wilcox in 1914. “We take it for granted in the [Elmshaven] office that Sister White has been led by the Lord in her failure to make any serious attempt to deal with prophetic scripture in an exegetical manner.” He emphasized that she made use of all scripture, “but these lessons have been of a practical nature, such as would be drawn from scripture by any good preacher who knows how to reach the human heart.” Then Crisler makes a pointed statement. “To use theological terms, she is a homilist rather than an exegete.” In other words, her writings should not be treated as scholarly textual analysis. She was aiming at readers who never used the word “exegetical.”

Seeing Ellen White as a preacher helps us recognize the variety of her writing. Too many of her readers, past and present, have refused to differentiate among the many products of her pen. They fail to read a letter differently from an article in the *Review* or the *Signs of the Times*. Focused on defending her from crude critics, they read a later, polished book such as *The Desire of Ages* in the same way they read the simple, direct words of *Early Writings*.

But careful readers must ask questions about purpose, audience, and development. Thanks to the activities of her literary executors, we have much material that was never intended for publication. This is both a blessing and a challenge. Think for a moment about the writings of the apostle Paul. The Bible contains possibly as many as fourteen letters written by Paul. Is there anything that would lead us to believe that Paul wrote only fourteen epistles? The answer is that the totality of his

work almost certainly exceeded the number that we have today. Would we be better off if we had the same percentage of Paul's writings as we have of Ellen White's?

Having fewer of Paul's letters certainly makes each one more precious. I argue that having the "essential apostle Paul" is a benefit to Christianity. Almost certainly, the letters of Paul were circulated throughout the early church. When one church received a particularly helpful letter, it is safe to assume that members of that church may have sent a copy to nearby believers. We have the "essential Paul" (his greatest hits?) because of a winnowing process the early church provided by sending, or not sending, letters that came their way. In the end, the church has a collection of timely, yet timeless, letters that spoke to the needs of the church in Paul's day, as well as of Christianity throughout the centuries.

One could argue that by retaining such a large portion of Ellen White's work, whether intended for publication or not, no similar winnowing process took place in Adventism. This is not to diminish the inspiration of Ellen White's work, but it does give us an expansive body of unwinnowed work. Many Adventists deem all her work, regardless of its purpose and intent, as of equal value. This was, perhaps, more than she intended.

Alden Thompson illustrates what happens when all her works are treated the same. He explains that in reading the *Testimonies* from start to finish the reader finds a very different person writing in volume 9 than in volume 1. The same can be said of most of Mrs. White's writings. She employs different genres and aims at different goals, adapting to time and place—a point defensive readers have often missed.

Does a letter/testimony hold the same intention and value as an article written for the *Review*? What about accounts of her visions? Does an article in the *Review* hold the same purpose and power as a sermon she preached at a camp meeting or General Conference session? Do testimonies, *Review* articles, and public sermons have the same authority as the books of the *Conflict of the Ages* series or her topical counsel on the reform dress? Does her admonition on coffee have the same power as her teaching on prayer?

## REJECTING A FALSE CHOICE

After teaching Adventist history for many years, I was forced to reject the false choice between a perfect leader and a "false prophet." I could not accept the Claude Holmes approach, however skillfully disguised. Yet I also rejected the destructive alternative. My dilemma was to seek an interpretation that maintained my understanding of inspiration, but did not reject clear historical evidence. Most of my students lost interest in Ellen White when they were offered only false or ill-informed choices. Unwilling to argue about infallibility, they just walked away. I believed there had to be another way to preserve the treasure that is the work of Ellen White.

I noticed that both Ellen White's most fervent admirers and her most vocal critics had missed something important. Much of what she wrote was clearly and simply in the category of homily. She was a writer, but she wrote as a preacher—just as Crisler recognized in her lifetime. Perhaps I should have had this insight sooner. One day while reading her last book, *Prophets and Kings*, it hit me—Ellen White was not a theologian. She was not a scholar. She was a preacher, a homilist. As a reader, I was swept up in the cadences of a powerful preacher. Her works held all the trademarks of a master of homiletics. A reader who sees this understands her purpose in a new way. Her sermons were merely tools in her hands as she sought to lead her audience to a particular conclusion. It was essential for them—and us—to understand this purpose.

The context of her emergence as a leader, writer, and preacher is equally important. As mentioned before, it is important not to try to understand all of Ellen White's writings in the same way. Many of her sermons used the narrative structure of scripture as their means to convey truth. Her use of a preaching format was common for Protestants in her time.

### GREAT PREACHERS

To understand Ellen White's context, we must recognize that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were filled with great preachers. Leigh Eric Schmidt in his book, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment*, makes a powerful argument that to understand the foundational period of America one must understand the auditory nature of its society. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American preaching followed the Reformation model of the sermon as theological treatise.

The best example is Jonathan Edwards. Often seen as one of America's preeminent theologians, Edwards preached theological truth. What differentiated him from other Puritan preachers was his willingness to use emotion to solidify his point. Edwards' famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" did not shy away from adding emotion to a strong theological treatise. He laid out the image of an eternity condemned to the flames of hell. Edwards' basic structure was an introduction focused on the depravity of humanity followed by a strong theological argument focused on the sovereignty of God, who according to His own wishes, could condemn any of His creation to hell. Edwards illustrated the argument about the sovereignty of God with the stark imagery of hell. Most people who cite this sermon miss the point of his illustration. They assume that Edwards sought to scare people into being obedient. That would make sense if Edwards were not an avid predestinarian who affirmed that human actions had no effect on one's salvation. Edwards' imagery of hell was simply an illustration about the power and rights of

an all-sovereign God to do as He pleased. All the fire and pain helped to impress the importance of that doctrine to his listeners.

Edwards' contemporary, George Whitefield, went a step further. Whitefield's sermons were not merely theological treatises with fear thrown in; he also called on his listeners to feel his message. It was said that Whitefield could make a crowd swoon simply by saying the word "Mesopotamia." His gifted oratory often replaced the rigor of theological argument.

Lyman Beecher, the last of the great American theological preachers and sometimes known as the "last Puritan," ushered in the nineteenth century. Beecher's sermons were powerful expositions of scripture meant to draw his Calvinist congregation into an "experience of grace" in which they could plausibly surmise that they might be one of the elect. Though Beecher began his career in full opposition to the revivalist Charles Grandison Finney, the most successful preacher of the first half of the Second Awakening, he would eventually succumb to what Nathan Hatch referred to as the "Democratization of American Christianity." The expectations of the audience shaped the preacher—as well as the other way around.

William Miller began to preach in this homiletic ferment. Considered by many to be the greatest preacher of the second half of the Second Awakening, Miller embraced the idea of the "sovereign audience" as he preached about the soon coming of Jesus. With other Advent preachers, he embraced the spoken word as crucial to their attempt to spread the message of Jesus' soon return. Joshua Himes brought to the movement other Second Awakening methods, including a full embrace of the press of his day. With audiences swelled through print advertising, Miller's spoken message echoed in churches, camp meetings, and arenas. In many ways, Miller harked back to the style of Edwards and Beecher, because he adhered so closely to scripture, but Miller also sought to reach the heart of his listeners. Miller once said of his audiences, their souls "are continually before me, sleeping or waking; I can see them perishing by thousands."

While like Miller in the apocalyptic focus of her preaching and writing, Ellen White's homiletical structure may also have been influenced by two of the greatest preachers of the second half of the nineteenth century—Henry Ward Beecher and Dwight L. Moody.

Beecher, whom one of his biographers dubbed "The Most Famous Man in America," helped to complete the transition from his father, "the last Puritan," to what Ann Douglas claims was the feminization of American culture. Douglas argued that preachers such as Beecher incorporated the genre of romance novels of the day which focused more on emotions and worried less about the particulars of theology.

Moody much more closely resonated with the sentiments of Ellen White and

Adventism. Whereas Beecher spoke to confirmed Christians, Moody's preaching was meant to convert. He routinely spoke to thousands of listeners—a nineteenth-century Billy Graham. Moody sought to move his listeners to conversion by whatever means necessary. He was less worried about the particulars of theology. Because of this focus, his illustrations were not the point. They were, instead, a means to an end. This context is important when we look at the purpose and method of sermons during Ellen White's time.

### REACHING HEARTS

Both Moody's and White's sermons had their own flair, and each used the spoken word as their means to convey the word of God and to persuade their listeners to change their lives.

Terrie Aamodt's research on "Ellen White as Speaker" emphasizes the importance of the spoken word for the Adventist prophet. Aamodt points out that her public speaking was not only a method to convey content to her listeners, but it was also a method to touch their hearts. Ellen and James White would often preach in tandem—James giving a doctrinal discourse with Ellen following "with an exhortation of considerable length, melting my way into the feelings of the congregation." For Ellen White, preaching was not merely an opportunity to share a message, but a distinct, unique portal through which she could reach hearers' hearts. Apparently, she was a very effective homilist, recognized by audiences beyond Adventist churches and camp meetings. For example, twenty thousand people attended a temperance sermon she delivered in Groveland, Massachusetts in 1876. After she preached to a large Methodist church in Salem, Oregon, a Methodist minister reportedly regretted that "that Mrs. White was not a staunch Methodist for they would make her a bishop at once."

The longer I taught Adventist Heritage, the more certain I became that the homilist view of Ellen White might be the key to understanding her. From a practical standpoint, we should understand that Ellen White was primarily an apocalyptic preacher who sought to inspire both individuals and the broader church with her passion for the soon coming of Jesus. She combined those illustrations with advice on how to live a better life while awaiting Jesus' return.

Focusing on her preaching role and style in no way undermines belief in the inspiration of Ellen White. Rather, this approach asks the reader to search the "sermon" for the principle she sought to convey, without assigning the illustrations a position of ultimate authority. An illustration has one purpose—to support and accentuate the central principle of the sermon. Much of Ellen White's writing uses this homiletic perspective, passing on to the reader/hearer an eternal principle in whatever way best conveys that point and transforms lives. Listening to Ellen White

as speaker, rather than reading her as text, protects us from misuse of her gift. The spoken word, even when informal or imprecise, has a unique power to change hearts.

What differentiates her homilies from social letters or visionary accounts, is their mechanism and purpose. Most of Ellen White's journal articles, which undergirded her books, matched the format of oral discourse. Even her "testimonies" had an oral flavor.

The purpose of a homily is to sway the listener to take a stand or to move in a particular direction. It is important to understand that not every portion of a sermon carries the same weight. The introduction and the illustration are not as important as the principle of the argument. The principle is the essence of the work. Then in the conclusion the speaker brings home how that principle can be transformed into action by the listener. Ellen White, like any good preacher, had a purpose for each of her homilies, but each of the various parts was not created equal.

### DANIEL'S DIET—AND OTHER MATTERS

Let's look at a familiar story from *Prophets and Kings*. The story of Daniel's and the three Hebrews' test regarding diet is a staple of Adventism. Growing up, I almost always heard the story as promoting vegetarianism, whether presented by high school teachers, pastors, evangelists, or health educators. However, if we take the time to look at it as more than a call to health reform, we may find something of even greater value.

The preacher-prophet illustrated her sermon about these young men in a way that would make the conclusions of a typical Adventist seem reasonable. She says, "Even a mere pretense of eating the food or drinking the wine would be a denial of their faith." Would it be wrong to infer that diet should be seen as crucial to "a denial of their faith"? This argument makes sense to any Adventist who has read through the first chapter of Daniel. She continued by saying, "They knew that their own physical and mental power would be injuriously affected by the use of wine." That fits the Adventist teetotaler perspective. Those statements seem straightforward. She carried on with the story of the dietary test, but implied that there was more to the test than merely what they ate or drank from the king's table. She said, "During this time they held fast their allegiance to God and depended constantly upon His power." Later, as she described all the ways in which the young men outshone the other candidates, she pointed out how their previous, "good habits" enabled them to stand firm when it would have been easy to give in to the crowd. She then praises the young men for holding to their beliefs and says they received the "insignia of the nobility with which nature honors those who are obedient to her laws." She goes on to say that by standing up for their principles, "they placed themselves where God could bless them."

As Ellen White proceeded from the homiletical illustration of the young men and their dietary test, she arrived at the real purpose of her sermon. One of the greatest challenges of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was the vast urbanization that engulfed many young people. Due to the growth of jobs in urban areas, many young men had to leave home and move to the cities for work. The Young Men's Christian Association came into existence, because many Christian families feared their sons might yield to the temptations of the city. Mrs. White said that Daniel and the three Hebrews "honored God in the smallest duties, as well as in the larger responsibilities." To her, the fact that the young men stood up for what they had been taught was of utmost importance. Their examples of adherence to their training from Israel was virtually as important as the dietary test itself. She said, "Many are waiting for some great work to be brought to them, while daily they lose opportunities for revealing faithfulness to God."

For Ellen White, the *content* of the dietary test was not the principle point of her homily. She went so far as to say, "Daily they fail of discharging with whole-heartedness the little duties of life. While they wait for some large work in which they may exercise supposedly great talents, and thus satisfy their ambitious longings, their days pass away." So, what were the large responsibilities young people should seek? Ellen White used the illustration of the dietary challenge to set up the larger question of developing a character that would bode well for young Adventists who made their way into the cities. She sought to focus on the core issue of this homily. "Pure hearts, strong hands, fearless courage, are needed; for the warfare between vice and virtue calls for ceaseless vigilance." Character, not diet, was the principle of the homily. She concluded, "Though surrounded by temptations to self-indulgence, especially in our large cities, where every form of sensual gratification is made easy and inviting, yet by divine grace their purpose to honor God may remain firm."

This is where the homilist methodology might stray from the traditional way of looking at this story in *Prophets and Kings*. The struggle is the same for many of Ellen White's writings. Traditionally, Adventists have used her narratives, such as the dietary test of Daniel and his companions, as a commentary on present-day issues. This use is problematic when readers apply isolated illustrations independent of the narrative and principle of the homily. Her central point was that young people should be prepared for the "temptations to self-indulgence" that large cities may bring. In other words, today's readers, schooled in Adventist dietary teachings, might perceive only health issues, while missing the rest of the sermon.

The Adventist prophet demonstrated that she did not find every element of a narrative to be timeless. In order to get the story straight, she was willing to rework parts of what she saw as her most important work, *The Great Controversy*, including

some of her most powerful indictments of the papacy's persecution of the Huguenots. It was not the specifics of any illustration which she found to be timeless, rather it was the central focus, the principle of her work, that she valued most.

Valuable as it is, the homiletical method should not be used indiscriminately, as an explanation of everything the prophet said or wrote. It works best in reading and understanding Ellen White's narrative writings. Using this method to read all her letters or testimonies may very well stretch it too far, but it is interesting to see how the two may interact when dealing with the same subject or event.

### PREACHING FROM 1888

The classic case to illustrate the differences can be found in the controversy surrounding the 1888 General Conference and the subject of righteousness by faith. In this instance, Sister White (to use an old title) wrote both letters/testimonies to individuals at the time of the controversy, but also thought the lessons would have a more general application for the broader church when she later wrote about Galatians in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

The rumblings of discord that preceded the 1888 General Conference stemmed from two precocious young pastor-teachers, E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones. The Adventist work in California was barely two decades old when these young men sought to enter into a dialogue with denominational leaders in Battle Creek, particularly General Conference president, G. I. Butler and *Review and Herald* editor, Uriah Smith.

While studying Adventist stalwart Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation*, A. T. Jones began to question Smith's use of historical data. Smith had gone into detail to identify which Germanic tribes (the ten horns of Daniel 7) had brought down the western Roman Empire. With equally cocksure precision, Jones offered a different list of barbarian invaders. To Butler and Smith, Jones had not merely revised the identity of the ten horns, but he had undermined the very essence of Adventist beliefs.

Though Butler initially sought to win Ellen White to his side in reference to the law in Galatians, she refused to be drawn into the debate, playing instead, the role of referee. To keep the church united and focused on bigger issues, such as the Sunday Law movement, she wrote to participants on both sides. Her counsel to Jones and Waggoner centered on their brashness in using church publications to incite discussion of matters she considered of "secondary importance." Her counsel for Butler and Smith concerned their lack of paternal guidance toward the young pastors/teachers who were in their care. She directly chastised Butler and Smith for taking an "overly critical attitude with younger men." Her actions regarding the major scriptural issues fit well with her overall method in her writing. Crisler spoke

about this in his letter to Wilcox saying, “But everything that some folks think is an attempt at interpreting, cannot be regarded by others as anything more than simply a practical lesson, with no reference whatever to the settlement of doctrinal points.” He concluded by saying, “She has expressed decidedly her aversion to including that which has even the semblance of an attempt to settle mooted doctrinal points.” He did not deny that on “great things of the law—the Sabbath command, and our duties toward God and man, she has chosen to speak in unmistakable language.” It is important to remember the infrequency of Ellen White’s pronouncements on matters of controverted interpretation and theology in her homiletical writings.

The issue that led to the most conflict in 1888 was the question of whether the law discussed in Galatians 3 was the moral law or the ceremonial law. President Butler took this matter personally. To him, and other traditionalists within Adventism, accepting that the moral law was “nailed to the cross” threatened the core of Adventism. Over the years leading up to 1888, Adventist leaders lined up to defend their church’s existence in the face of these disputes.

Ellen White’s letters were straightforward and blunt. She dealt with issues very similar to the 1888 General Conference in an account of the book of Galatians as a whole, while touching on the issues of Galatians 3. The chapter, “Apostasy in Galatia” in *The Acts of the Apostles* focused on the importance of a unified body of Christ. Writing more than two decades later, her general description of the situation in Galatia was easily identifiable to those familiar with Adventism’s internal conflict surrounding the 1888 General Conference.

To show how differently Paul dealt with the church in his letter to the Galatians, as opposed to how church leadership handled Jones and Waggoner, she moved into her homily. She was very direct (without naming names) when she said, “Harshness and injudicious haste on Paul’s part would have destroyed his influence over many of those whom he longed to help.” That is fairly pointed. She went on to say, “An important lesson for every minister of Christ to learn is that of adapting his labors to the condition of those whom he seeks to benefit.” She then appears to illustrate her point with an admonition like her words in her letters to Butler and Smith. “Tenderness, patience, decision, and firmness are alike needful; but these are to be exercised with proper discrimination. To deal wisely with different classes of minds, under varied circumstances and conditions, is a work requiring wisdom and judgment enlightened and sanctified by the Spirit of God.”

Just as preachers, at times, are forced to call their congregation to face a problem, Ellen White used a specific situation to make a broader point. She then insisted that all sides of the debate needed to be careful in tense situations. “In apostolic times [Satan] led the Jews to exalt the ceremonial law and reject Christ; at the present

time he induces many professing Christians, under pretense of honoring Christ, to cast contempt on the moral law and to teach that its precepts may be transgressed with impunity." She pointed out the dangers of legalism while warning, as well, that the church should recognize the value of the law.

In concluding the chapter, the prophetic preacher sought to call both sides to the essential focus of her message at Minneapolis. "In their lives were revealed the fruits of the Spirit—'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, faith, meekness, temperance.' The name of God was glorified, and many were added to the number of believers through that religion." Through her homily on Galatians, Ellen White encouraged readers of *The Acts of the Apostles* to seek a middle ground, which she believed would enhance their faith.

### PREACHING TO OUR TIME

Over the years, many Adventists have seen the *Testimonies* as an independent source from which the whole church could glean guidance regarding a particular topic. What her chapter in *The Acts of the Apostles* illustrates is that the methods necessary to discuss how the church should work together may differ from personal letters. She chose to use the homiletic approach as the means of sharing that message to the broader church. Her words in *The Acts of the Apostles* were not nearly as pointed as when she personally counseled church leadership about their personal conduct, because they focused on the principles of living as a church family and not on guidance to specific church leaders.

In the examples of Daniel and his three friends and the law in Galatians chapter 3, Ellen White used a homiletical approach to address issues within her own time as well as ours. Reading her as a preacher helps us steer clear of futile arguments about a perfect prophet, who never changed her mind or her style. Our eyes are opened, and we can understand the rich variety of her writings. Even more importantly, our hearts are warmed by a skilled preacher leading us toward eternal principles—teachings intensely relevant to the lives of twenty-first century believers.

### FOR FURTHER READING

- Gilbert Valentine pointed out to me the very significant letter from C. C. Crisler to M. C. Wilcox, December 14, 1914 (CCC July-Dec. 1914, White Estate). I could not have asked for clearer confirmation of my hypothesis.
- For Claude Holmes, see "Have We an Infallible 'Spirit of Prophecy'?" in the White Estate's C. E. Holmes Document File. It is hard to exaggerate Holmes' unfortunate impact on denominational discussions of Ellen White.
- Joseph J. Battistone, "Ellen White's Authority as Bible Commentator" (*Spectrum*, 1977) deserves wider influence.

## Reclaiming the Prophet

- Terrie Aamodt wrote a valuable chapter on Ellen White as speaker in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (2014), an Oxford University Press volume she co-edited with Ronald L. Numbers and Gary Land.
- Another Adventist writer who was very helpful to me was Alden Thompson. Consult the vividly titled, *Escape From the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy—and Helped Me to Do It Too* published by Pacific Press in 2005.
- For further insight into American religion in Ellen White's day, see Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (2006); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977); Eric Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2002).

## CHAPTER FIVE

# ELLEN WHITE AS A DEVOTIONAL WRITER

Denis Fortin

A few years ago, Andrews University Press published my annotated edition of *Steps to Christ*. I began the preface of this edition with the statement: “Good books change people’s lives” and went on to illustrate these words with the examples of Martin Luther reading Paul’s epistle to the Romans, John Wesley listening to the reading of Martin Luther’s preface to his commentary on Romans, and William Miller reading a sermon on education. All three men saw their lives transformed after reading and pondering some insights gained from books.

For me, this experience came about fifty years ago. For some time, I had been watching the French version of *It Is Written* on my local TV station. I watched this program as faithfully as I could each Sunday. After one of these broadcasts, I requested a brochure on what the Bible teaches about death and the afterlife. I still have that small pamphlet, the first of a series of Bible study guides from *Amazing Facts*. Before receiving the next pamphlet, a representative from the program came by my home for a brief visit and to answer any questions I might have about the Bible. I was a shy teenager and did not know how to converse about biblical ideas. But before leaving, Daniel Rebsomen, the pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist church, gave me a paperback edition of a little book, *Vers Jésus*, with a picture of Jesus knocking on a door on the cover. That’s how I got acquainted with *Steps to Christ*.

That was the first Adventist book I read. And this book was the beginning of a spiritual journey that has now lasted many decades. Since then, I have reread this classic book of Ellen White multiple times. It has shaped my understanding of God’s love for me, my salvation in Jesus despite my failings, and God’s desire for my spiritual growth. Within a few years, I had read all of Ellen White’s major books, and I was totally immersed in her thought and spirituality.

## GOD'S GRACE ON MY JOURNEY

In *Steps to Christ*, as the title denotes, Ellen White presents the Christian life as a journey under God's grace. One passage I have cherished imparts wisdom for perseverance and steadfastness in this journey:

While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God; while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us. A change will be seen in the character, the habits, the pursuits. The contrast will be clear and decided between what they have been and what they are. The character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts.<sup>64</sup>

I have found that this metaphor of the Christian journey is reassuring when things do not go smoothly along the way. I was a student at Canadian Union College (now Burman University) from 1978 to 1982, and many will remember these years as ominous and troublesome.

As a young Seventh-day Adventist, coming from a very different religious culture and never exposed to the historical controversies that had perturbed most Protestant denominations during the last century, and even less exposed to the intra-Adventist controversies, I was in a sort of a daze when I heard of Desmond Ford being a heretic for his views on the sanctuary and Walter Rea an apostate for labeling Ellen White a liar. I could sense something worrying was happening, but I could not understand exactly what these issues were about. I had read so many of Ellen White's books, and they had blessed me greatly. So, what were the issues that troubled so many people?

At the heart of the discussions and debates, it seemed to me at the time, were Ellen White's inspiration and how to interpret her writings. I read parts of Desmond Ford's *Glacier View* manuscript and of Walter Rea's allegations. I read some of the *Spectrum* articles about Ellen White's use of other authors. And I was confused. What was I to do with Ellen White's books?

I remember struggling with these questions in the summer of 1981 between my junior and senior years of college. I could sense that my professors generally agreed with Ford and Rea, but they were not able to say anything that would compromise their positions. I had to wrestle with this on my own and through conversations with other theology students. I came to a settled position after reading a few

chapters of *Selected Messages* in which Ellen White spoke of her inspiration and the inspiration of her writings. And at the time, that personal and intellectual settlement was sufficient to my mind.

That settled position, however, continued to be challenged in the following decades. As more studies were published about Ellen White's writings, the more I became aware that what I thought was simple was, in fact, a very complex problem. These issues surrounding Ellen White's inspiration and the production of her books continued to puzzle me for a long time.

My journey with Ellen White and moving away from a simplistic view of her inspiration took some time. I am grateful for my many years of teaching the course on the writings of Ellen White at Andrews University and for George Knight, who seeing retirement approaching passed on to Jerry Moon and me the project of *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*—a project that lasted more than a decade before its publication. It is in the context of these assignments that I became much more aware of the difficulties surrounding her inspiration and her writings.

More recently, my work on the George Butler biography further helped me in this journey. Butler had a high view of Ellen White's inspiration, but he wrestled immensely with some of her testimonies that, from his viewpoint, were obviously inaccurate and misunderstood some facts and situations. Butler wrote his series of articles on inspiration in 1884 in part to explain Ellen White's phenomenon of inspiration and the imperfections and limitations of her writings. Butler knew, firsthand, Ellen White to be an imperfect human being, but while he concluded that her writings could also be imperfect, he believed that they were nonetheless endowed with valuable spiritual insights for Adventists.

### PARADISE LOST<sup>65</sup>

But even before I began working on the Butler biography, another small project definitely opened my eyes to the complexity of Ellen White's writings and shifted my conclusions regarding the purpose of her writings for our church today. Long before working on *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, I had heard that there were similarities between Ellen White's rendition of her March 1858 great controversy vision regarding the entrance of sin into the universe and John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). But what I did not expect was the shock that the extent of these similarities would produce in my understanding of Ellen White's continued prophetic role in our church.

In 1957, Ruth Elizabeth Burgeson wrote a master's thesis at Pacific Union College in which she compared Ellen White's narrative in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) with *Paradise Lost*.<sup>66</sup> Heidi Olson Campbell and Michael Campbell wrote the article on Milton for *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, and in their estimation

Burgeson concluded that “Each author had a different purpose in writing, reflecting their contrasting views of theodicy. Their divergent purposes determined their form and length of writing, and, most noticeably, the emphasis each author placed upon narrative.”<sup>67</sup> Burgeson found “no disagreement between the two authors in stating significant facts,” but did find “frequent differences in manner of statement, in amount of detail, in emphasis given, or even in the exact order of a series of events, but none in facts pertinent to the biblical story.”<sup>68</sup>

Those statements are essentially true if one limits this comparison to Ellen White’s *Patriarchs and Prophets* as Burgeson had done. However, if Burgeson had compared Milton to Ellen White’s narrative in *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1 (1870), instead of what was published twenty years later in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, the differences between the two narratives would have been even less evident, and she may have found the similarities more problematic. Nonetheless, her conclusion remains essentially true that she found “no disagreement between the two authors in stating significant facts.”

According to W. C. White, shortly after receiving her vision in March 1858, Ellen White shared the major points of the vision at a meeting in Battle Creek. John Andrews told her that some of the things she had described from her vision were similar to what John Milton had written in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. He asked if she had read *Paradise Lost*. She replied that she had not. Andrews read some of the passages from Milton and, a few weeks later, gave Ellen White a copy of *Paradise Lost*. Still, according to W. C. White, “She took the book, hardly knowing just what to do with it. She did not open it, but took it to the kitchen and put it up on a high shelf, determined that if there was anything in the book like what God had shown her in vision, she would not read it until after she had written out what the Lord had revealed her.”<sup>69</sup>

If we are to accept W. C. White’s word that Ellen White did not use *Paradise Lost* in writing her 1858 narrative of the great controversy vision in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1, one wonders if she had used Milton’s book twelve years later for the first four chapters of *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1. Also, to be noted is the length of the narratives. Ellen White’s narrative in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1 (1858) is found in three chapters and in two more chapters in Vol. 3 (1864). From 6,000 words in *Spiritual Gifts*, the narrative becomes 11,000 words in *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1 (1870).<sup>70</sup>

In my estimation, well over 75 percent of the ideological and conceptual content of the narrative in *Spirit of Prophecy* is identical to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Most significant, and at once troubling, are the extrabiblical scenes the two authors describe with similar details. Whether writing about the exaltation of the Son by the Father and the jealousy arising in Lucifer’s heart, or the Father and the Son

conferring together about the rebellion of Lucifer, or the visit of an angel from heaven to warn Adam and Eve in Eden of the angelic rebellion, or the detailed description of the immediate results of Adam and Eve's transgression—all of these non-biblical facts are undistinguishable in both narratives.

But the similarities are not limited to non-biblical details. The chronology of these extrabiblical events is the same. The cosmological geography of heaven, earth, and hell is identical, with the gates of heaven guarded by angels. There is also some similarity of vocabulary in many instances, but the two works are different literary genres. It is obvious that Ellen White did not copy Milton's poem, as the phraseology and literary style between the two works are too different. Rather, it seems that she adapted the information found in *Paradise Lost*.

But most surprising are the theological similarities. In both accounts, the story is told from Lucifer's perspective. The reason for the fall of Lucifer is jealousy of the Son's exaltation. The Father's exaltation of the Son and the lack of any reference to the Holy Spirit resonate with the Arian subordinationism and anti-Trinitarianism of the British Arianism Milton espoused. The law of God is thought to be unfair and arbitrary and to restrict personal liberty. Yet, the law of God is said to be immutable for all eternity. And the two narratives exude references to the angels as the same "heavenly watchers" found in Second Temple Jewish writings and early Christian tradition.

Understandably, there are many difficult questions that Adventists ask at this point and should have been asking for many generations. What do we do with Ellen White's claim that she saw these events in a vision? Since both Milton and White wrote about the same events transpiring in heaven, events not revealed in the biblical text, which of the two authors saw these first? Did she really see these events? Honestly, in my opinion, the only person who could answer these questions is Ellen White. And we are left searching for answers.

After completing this study, I remembered Ronald Numbers' findings in *Prophetess of Health*, all the evidence of borrowing (or perhaps plagiarizing) from and adapting other authors given in Walter Rea's, *The White Lie*, and Desmond Ford's analysis of Ellen White's inspiration in his Glacier View sanctuary study. And I concluded that the evidence they presented was valid and could not be reasoned away. Fred Veltman's study on the sources of *The Desire of Ages* and Robert Olson's response in *One Hundred and One Questions about the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* endorsed many of these same conclusions.<sup>71</sup> What to believe and claim about Ellen White's inspiration and the value of her writings are complex issues. Many people at this point would simply stop reading her writings or more drastically, claim she is a fraud. However, there is a more constructive and helpful option to consider.

### STEPS TO CHRIST

Let's return to the annotated edition of *Steps to Christ*. I came to think of doing this new edition after I saw annotated editions of classical literature. These editions include a historical introduction and then add numerous footnotes on each page, giving references and explanations of the words used by the author. I thought that this same genre, a critical edition of Ellen White's books, could be of value to Adventist readers.

As I did my research, I discovered how the book *Steps to Christ* had been put together by Marian Davis. In fact, I realized that all of Ellen White's major books were compilations, adaptations, and repurposing of her prior writings, carried out under her supervision by her assistants, especially by Marian Davis after she began to work for Ellen White in 1878 and continuing until her death in 1904.

With the help of the electronic database, I searched for the antecedents of all the sentences of *Steps to Christ* and found that probably 90 percent of the book came from her prior writings. Sometimes entire paragraphs were repurposed, sometimes paragraphs were a collage (a literal cut-and-paste adaptation) of materials taken from multiple articles, testimonies, or chapters of books. I felt that Ellen White most likely did not have the time nor the expertise to do this kind of intricate composition. In the end, I concluded that the content of *Steps to Christ*, although using words written by Ellen White, and done under her supervision, was in fact Marian Davis's understanding of Ellen White's steps to Christ.<sup>72</sup>

But I wondered how this edition would be received. After all it is a critical edition of a most beloved book by Ellen White. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. I learned quickly, however, that not everyone was pleased with this new edition. Some church leaders wondered why this book had been published as it would unsettle the minds of people when they learn all these facts about how Ellen White's books were produced. The obfuscation and perpetuating of myths about Ellen White are still very much alive. Hiding the facts is a form of deception, creating unhealthy expectations in people who lack crucial information and who are very disillusioned when they later learn the full truth about Ellen White's books.

My journey with Ellen White has therefore taken me in many different directions, but after meandering through all these issues I have come to some conclusions. When I consider carefully how Ellen White prepared her books, with the help of her assistants and the use of other publications, how she used Scripture in her writings, following basically the same methodology she inherited from other preachers and authors, among them William Miller, I think it is safe to consider her writings on the biblical stories as largely devotional. This conclusion avoids having to ask or to answer legitimate questions about what Ellen White really saw

in her visions. It, then, does not matter as much to know what she saw or what she copied from other authors or how much her assistants did in the preparation of her books. What matters more, in my opinion, are the long-lasting benefits of her writings to the spiritual experience of those who read them. Essentially, I think this is what she hoped her writings would accomplish.

## DEVOTIONAL WRITINGS

Ellen White's ministry was a prophetic ministry, and her writings were intended to prepare the Adventist people for the soon second coming of Christ. By "prophetic," I mean in the genre of the classical prophets like Jeremiah or Amos, explaining the prior revelations of God, not necessarily predicting the future. It seems to me this eschatological expectation was the driving concern of her ministry and writings. Her sermons and testimonies to individuals, churches, or institutions were meant to motivate people into following essential religious or cultural standards that if overlooked or disobeyed were bound to prevent them from inheriting eternal life. Ellen White insisted that conformity to her understanding of these standards was as important as keeping the commandments of God and that those who violated or dismissed her counsels were guilty of neglecting the will of God for them. In the end, they might be lost. Her testimonies and sermons, and many of her books, were this genre of authoritative prophetic writing and can be best understood in her religious and cultural context.

Her other published writings on biblical stories and themes, including the books of the *Conflict of the Ages* series,<sup>73</sup> along with *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896) and *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900), were homiletical commentaries meant to encourage people to study the Bible more carefully in order to guide their lives in the time of the end. Given what we know about how these books were prepared, we can conclude that they were meant as spiritual and devotional writings and were never intended as infallible, final commentaries on the Bible.<sup>74</sup> In fact, as stated in an earlier chapter of this book, Ellen White's most trusted assistants understood her comments on Scripture as that of "a homilist [preacher] rather than an exegete."<sup>75</sup> It is not being unfaithful to her legacy to see her writings as primarily devotional.

I have identified many different uses of Scripture in her writings that give further evidence that we should consider these books as primarily devotional writing.

## TYPOLOGY

Typology understands or perceives a person or event in the Old Testament as a figure or illustration—a type—of something or someone in the New Testament or in the church. Ellen White understood many Bible characters to be such types.

Obviously, some types are already intimated at in the Bible, and Ellen White simply further enlarged these typologies in her own writings. For example, she understood Elijah at the transfiguration of Jesus, to be a type of the redeemed who will be translated at the second coming of Christ and Moses as a type of those who will be resurrected.<sup>76</sup> She interpreted Moses in his intercession for the people during the idolatry at Mount Sinai, as a type of Christ.<sup>77</sup> The difficulty with a typology, however, is that it can easily swing into allegory. Pastors often employ types in sermons, and it is obvious then that their intent is devotional rather than exegetical.

### **MORAL APPLICATIONS**

Another way Ellen White used Scripture supporting a devotional genre of writing is in her moral applications. Moral applications are a way of drawing moral lessons from events that happened to biblical people and applying these lessons to the church today. In *Patriarchs and Prophets*, the story of Nadab and Abihu is a good example of her moralizing interpretation of a Bible story. She understood this story to be fraught with moral lessons for God's people today. From what happened to these two priests, she concluded that church members should learn that it was a lack of firmness in their childhood education that led to this tragedy, that there was a lack of reverence for God in the home and in the sanctuary and, of course, the detrimental effects of using alcohol on one's decision-making abilities.<sup>78</sup>

Moral applications are naturally homiletical and pastoral in purpose. These applications are perceived from the commentator's perspective, within a particular context and with an intended audience. They will vary from one commentator to another, from one context to another, and there are no real objective limits to what can be seen in a text and how it can be applied to a particular contemporary context. The moral application of a biblical story is primarily a coveted gift for preachers, and one that was claimed by biblical prophets. What is difficult to ascertain is to what extent a moral application of a Bible story by a commentator a hundred years ago is still relevant and applicable today, and unfortunately, many Adventists use Ellen White's moral applications regardless of context.

### **CHARACTER SKETCHES**

Given the overarching theme of the great controversy in her writings, how biblical people related to God in this controversy between good and evil allowed Ellen White to illustrate how one should live in order to be victorious. Hence, Ellen White often developed character sketches of biblical people and applied their life principles

to people in her day. There are many such character sketches in her narratives; among her favorites are Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and the apostles Paul and John. A great example of her development of character sketches is the chapter "Lives of Great Men" in *Education*.<sup>79</sup> After discussing the examples of Joseph and Daniel, she stated this well-known, yet borrowed, thought: "The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall."<sup>80</sup>

## SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Another approach to Scripture is spiritual warfare. More than anyone else in Adventism, and that because of her prophetic gift, Ellen White presented to her readers "behind the scenes" events, such as conversations between Christ and Satan, or between evil angels, or how God interpreted or reacted to events. This approach is closely connected with her understanding of the great controversy and enlightens her commentary on Scripture more than any other approach to Scripture she uses.

Earlier books of Ellen White include more of these "behind the scenes" descriptions and insights than later books. As I have already described, by using John Milton's *Paradise Lost* for *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1 (1870), she described at length what happened to Lucifer as he rebelled against God.<sup>81</sup> Among the best examples of this approach are her chapters, "Satan's Enmity Against the Law" in *Patriarchs and Prophets* and "It Is Finished" in *The Desire of Ages*.<sup>82</sup> The first is a spiritual warfare commentary on Satan's intentions and goals against Israel as they camped at Mount Sinai. The chapter "It Is Finished" is an interlude in her narrative in which she described how heaven and Satan looked at the events of Calvary.

## RHETORICAL USE OF BIBLICAL PHRASES

A fifth approach to Scripture Ellen White used was very prominent in her time. Preachers of all denominations were known to use biblical phrases and expressions for rhetorical purposes. They used these expressions simply for what they said, with no intention of being faithful to the context of the passage in which it first appeared. The culture of the time was steeped in Scripture, and biblical phrases easily became part of daily conversation. In the English-speaking world, the consistent and pervasive use of the King James Bible led to this widespread practice, and many expressions still used today originated with this custom.

Ellen White often did the same thing in her sermons and writings. Her use of Paul's expression in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "Eyes have not seen and ears have not heard

the things God has prepared for those who love him,” is a good example. She often used this phrase to refer to the beautiful things God has prepared for the redeemed on the new earth.<sup>83</sup> Her use of this phrase is often rhetorical and is not concerned with the original context. Paul used this passage from Isaiah 64:4 to speak of the plan of salvation that God has made known to the nations through him, a plan that up to then “eyes had not seen nor ears heard.” Interestingly, however, Paul also used this passage rhetorically when he quoted Isaiah 64:4 in the context of a vision of God’s judgment. Thus, Ellen White’s use of Scripture in this example is not that much different from Paul’s own use.

### BIBLICAL ANALOGY AND PARALLELISM

This last approach to Scripture, in contrast to the other five which are more homiletical and pastoral, is more technical and comes close to what we consider biblical scholarship.<sup>84</sup> Ellen White used Scripture to build biblical analogies and parallelisms. She often drew parallels between various Bible stories, events, people, or texts. Often, she explained the meaning of a story by drawing on many texts of the Bible. In connecting many stories and texts, she saw a basic harmony between all the books of the Bible. An example is the first chapter of *The Desire of Ages*, where she explained the meaning of Jesus’ first advent and referred to more than twenty-five texts of Scripture, all within the space of eight pages.

When I consider all this evidence regarding how her books on the biblical stories were produced and how she used Scripture in her writings, I conclude that her intent was primarily homiletical and devotional. By devotional, I do not mean providing merely nice, beautiful insights into the biblical stories. Christian writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were devotional writers when their intent was to inspire their readers to live a holy life and to reflect the character of God. As a devotional writer, Ellen White wished that through union with Christ and sanctification, lives would be transformed and characters would be changed. The titles of some of her best-loved books are in that sense devotional—*Steps to Christ*, *The Desire of Ages*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*. Illustrative of this approach is this statement: “In the contemplation of Christ we linger on the shore of a love that is measureless.”<sup>85</sup> A century before Ellen White, the British author William Law wrote:

“Devotion signifies a life given or devoted to Christ. . . . He therefore is a devout man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way or spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God, who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety by doing everything in the name of God and under such rules as are conformable to His glory.”<sup>86</sup>

I believe this is the vision Ellen White had for her writings—a vision we should reclaim.<sup>87</sup> Her books have blessed millions of people, because they are devotional and spiritual commentaries. People read these books and find insights that touch their lives and give them hope and an orientation for the future—just as they did for me as a young adult. There have been, and likely there will continue to be, critical, academic studies of Ellen White's prophetic ministry and writings. There is a very real possibility that the more we learn about the details of her writings—how they were composed and redacted, and the sources she used—some Adventists will neglect and set aside these writings. Many are disillusioned when they learn these facts. But academic analysis does not eliminate the intrinsic value of her writings if these writings are accepted for what the author intended. To acknowledge that her books are a form of devotional literature, designed to draw people closer to Christ and to living a holy life, would ensure their powerful and lasting value within our denomination.



## CHAPTER SIX

# “GOD WANTS US ALL TO HAVE COMMON SENSE”: ELLEN WHITE’S GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETATION

Eric Anderson

**H**istorians do not need to restrict themselves to fact. Indeed, what “actually happened” can often be illuminated by imagining what did *not* happen—and reflecting on why.

If we are serious about understanding the past, we might profitably speculate, for example, about why an aboriginal “Columbus” did not sail eastward and stumble ashore in Ireland or imagine plausible ways the Axis Powers might have emerged victorious from the crucible of World War II or reflect on how an un-assassinated Lincoln might have managed Reconstruction. “How would the world have been different if the Spanish Armada had succeeded?” is a question that might be asked by someone other than a novelist.

In fact, a genuine historian can hardly avoid some form of the “what if” question. It shows up in disguised form when we ask, “Why did the Civil Rights Movement succeed when it did?” Or even when we attempt a “moral reckoning” for the British Empire, weighing achievements and abuses. What “might have been” affects our definition of the word “possible” and what answers we look for in the past.

A little “what if” or imaginary history would, I believe, help us understand Ellen G. White. Thinking about what could have happened helps explain what, in fact, did happen in the life of this influential religious leader. Let’s try a thought experiment.

### WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Imagine, for example, this scenario: the Adventist prophet died in 1884, not 1915. What difference would that one pseudo-fact have made in Adventist history? And how can this kind of speculative history help us understand the woman who actually died thirty-one years later?

Here's how history might have been written.

Worn out by unrelenting work and in deep sorrow over the death (in 1881) of her energetic helpmeet, James, Ellen died three years later. Church leaders mourned her death, remembering the role she had played in transforming a group of scattered saints, including not a few fanatics, into a stable denomination with a clear set of doctrines and a powerful sense of mission to the world. They knew that the church's newfound commitment to healthful living and education were the result of her leadership, exercised through ceaseless travel, preaching, and "testimonies." Both leaders and ordinary believers resolved to remain faithful to her teachings, whatever the future held.

Almost as soon as she was buried, the challenges began. In crucial areas, ranging from institution-building to doctrine, the "Spirit of Prophecy" was essential in forestalling destructive change or, as we might say today, "mission drift"—that is, forgetting basic commitments. The challenges came in great matters—such as understanding law and righteousness or the doctrine of the Trinity—and in pragmatic issues, like the ideal age for children to begin school or how to translate her writings. For the next three decades, the church's determination to be faithful to "God's leading in our past" made all the difference.

A new teaching roiled Adventism shortly after Ellen White's death in 1884. Younger leaders, A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, far away from the denominational headquarters in Battle Creek, provoked a debate about the meaning of Paul's statements on "the law" in the epistle to the Galatians. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law," declared the peripatetic apostle. "Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith that should afterward be revealed." The law served as a "schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ," he explained, but now "that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster." Adventists had insisted that Paul was talking about the ceremonial law, the detailed rites and rules of Moses, not the unchanging moral law of the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath.

"That's wrong," declared the young reformers, men rooted on the west coast and at home in fledgling Healdsburg College. Adventists, they said, needed to take another look at Paul's vivid letter. The apostle was discussing all law, including the moral law. "No man is justified by the law in the sight of God," they read from their King James Bible, applying the language to law in general, not just the rules of ritual uncleanness spelled out in Leviticus. "The just shall live by faith," they insisted, asserting that their fellow believers were in danger of drifting into legalism.

Led by *Review and Herald* editor, Uriah Smith, and General Conference president, George I. Butler, the denomination handled the challenge of the new teaching directly and deftly. They called for an orderly response—new doctrines should be submitted to "brethren of experience." It was simply reckless for people to start

sharing radical new ideas without any attempt at group study, reasoned debate, and consensus-building.

More than that, said the defenders of Ellen White, we have met this teaching before. Years earlier, Joseph H. Waggoner, father of young crusader E. J. Waggoner, had challenged the idea that Paul's strictures on "the law" meant only the ceremonial law. After a vision on the subject, Ellen White had rejected the older Waggoner's teaching in 1856.

If that's not enough evidence, the traditionalists added, please read Ellen White's last book, *Sketches from the Life of Paul* (1883). In her discussion of the book of Galatians, there is no hint that Adventists need to change their understanding of the law. To the end of her life, Ellen White had taught that the law from which Christ freed us, the law that believers are no longer "under," was the Mosaic law—the temple ceremonies made irrelevant by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

A tract war followed, with Butler publishing *The Law in the Book of Galatians* in 1886, and the younger Waggoner responding with *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* two years later. (Oddly enough, each author dedicated his tract to the recently deceased prophet.) Finally, after repeated and patient explanations at camp meetings and in church publications, church leaders felt compelled to act. At the General Conference of 1888 the proponents of the new view were officially rebuked and then defrocked, stripped of their ministerial credentials. Of course, righteousness by faith is important, declared the church leaders, but we have always understood that. We must reaffirm the old landmarks, which is what the late Sister White would have wanted us to do.

## WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

Readers may become impatient, at this point, with my hypothetical history. "What really happened?" is the question that keeps elbowing its way to front of the curious crowd gathered around this counter-factual thought experiment. By imagining what might have happened, but did not, we can see more clearly the shock of the words and deeds of the leader who did not die in 1884.

The living Ellen White was not as easy to control as the honored dead one. A woman with a mind of own, she was not always predictable. Her conservative defenders, in fact, were stunned by her actions in response to a serious doctrinal challenge. We can share the shock. Instead of having their ministerial credentials canceled, the young reformers were endorsed by the aging "messenger of the Lord." What might have happened did not happen at all. Quite the opposite.

In the crisis around the law, Ellen White emphatically refused to allow her earlier statements to close off discussion. She would not let participants in this significant doctrinal discussion short-circuit the arduous work of wrestling with the biblical

text. Put another way, she objected to rigging the rules of the game, to using as a trump card something she had said decades earlier.

If she supported the reformers against the old guard, in another sense she criticized both sides. Again and again, she called for charity and toleration, in effect rebuking the behavior of both insurgents and incumbents. Committed to maintaining church unity, she did not believe that being “right” authorized anybody’s contempt or fury.

Even more startling, Ellen White, a person with an unshakeable confidence in God’s providential leading, changed her mind. In her own response to the debate about how to read Galatians, she showed that she fully accepted the Adventist concept of “present truth.” Over time, certain ideas became clearer to her, and she adjusted her priorities. In other words, the most compelling message for the 1880s was different from the central issue, say, of the 1840s. Indeed, looking backward, later Adventists might detect hints of imperfection in earlier believers, even old heresies rejected by the Christian mainstream.

At each point in the discussion, the living prophet was determined to connect theology to practical religion. The law as a schoolmaster leading us to Christ had to be more than a vivid metaphor or an allusive, technical argument. She asked, directly and indirectly, “How does this change how I live?” Is the resurrected Jesus my tutor, my companion today?

### OTHER “WHAT IF” EPISODES

“What if” thinking can be applied to several other episodes in the post-1884 ministry of Ellen White. Without inventing other hypothetical endings for her, we find that “what actually happened” is full of surprises, if only we are alert to the contingencies of history. In four separate episodes in the later part of her life, the prophetic leader, the matriarch of Adventism, used her authority to forestall a misuse of her writings, to prevent people from using her name to end an argument prematurely or block theological change.

Even in her day, many Seventh-day Adventists unwittingly adopted, in a sense, my counter-factual history. For them, Ellen White stopped living at some convenient point, whether 1884 or 1904. She may have been physically alive, but she was not expected to change or revise or adjust in any way. She was not granted the power to exclaim, “But that is not what I meant at all.” Or “It looks different now.” Or “I have had more light on that subject.”

She kept on living, however, right up to her last days at Elmshaven.

For example, Ellen White’s counsel on early childhood education was clear and regularly reiterated. “For the first eight or ten years of a child’s life the field or garden is the best schoolroom, the mother the best teacher, nature the best lesson book,”

she said in one representative statement. From at least the 1870s she had been saying "Do not send your little ones away to school too early." She started giving this counsel long before Adventist congregations generally attempted to support church schools.

In 1902 when the Adventist community around St. Helena Sanitarium opened a church school for the first time, no provision was made for students eight years old or younger. When the prophet herself suggested an expansion of this school in 1904, with "a lower department" for "the children that are as old as seven years and eight years and nine years," some supporters of the new school hesitated. They were ready, in effect, to quote Sister White against her own proposed innovation. As she paraphrased their uncompromising position: "Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it."

Speaking in a schoolboard meeting, Ellen White emphasized the context of her counsel. She had begun warning against early school attendance when there was no Adventist school system. Furthermore, not all parents were able to live up to the ideals she had described. As a practical matter, the church needed to provide some discipline to children who were otherwise being neglected, wandering about the area and "getting into mischief."

To those who proposed an inflexible application of her statements, she said in some exasperation, "God wants us all to have common sense." Without in any way retreating from her description of ideal education, she declared, "Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things." It is hard to imagine better instructions for a conscientious reader of "the Spirit of Prophecy."

Time and again at this school board meeting, Mrs. White herself exercised the common sense that she endorsed, allowing changing circumstances to modify her language and its application. In another chapter of this book, Donald R. McAdams reminds us that she authorized the correction of faulty grammar or historical errors, supplied quotation marks where glaringly absent, and quietly rejected the claim that her very words were divinely chosen. She moved with caution, of course, since some of her followers had difficulty reconciling the concept of inspiration with development or improvement. Though these Adventist Americans were immersed in a culture enamored with "progress," and celebrated "present truth," they did not expect their prophet to change.

### CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CONDITIONS

But change she did. Perhaps no work better illustrates this progress than *The Great Controversy* and the attendant recreation of earth's history in the *Conflict of the Ages* series. As Juan Carlos Viera has noted, her "great controversy vision" of 1858 grew from the 200 pages of *Spiritual Gifts* to 3,500 pages by 1916. Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to her sources in this massive expansion, noting her reliance

on standard biblical recreations and the Protestant historians of her time, often recycling both words and structure from these authorities. But recent scholars have said little about how her message changed in *translation*.

Late in her life, she approved adjusting her Reformation history for Spanish readers in predominantly Catholic cultures. Today, in Spanish versions of *The Great Controversy* there is an extra chapter, not written by Ellen White, describing Protestant stirrings in Spain. Moreover, the language of the book has been changed to moderate what W. C. White admitted was an “anti-Catholic” spirit permeating the whole book. Prompted by concerned leaders in Europe, the prophet’s son and counselor agreed in 1913 “that we could modify, with the author’s consent, several of those passages which are most objectionable to our Roman Catholic critics.” In the Spanish edition of *The Great Controversy* that is now sold in Catholic countries, some of the most militant language has been carefully toned down. For Ellen White and her advisors, apparently, this course of action was just common sense. As she wrote late in life, “We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics. Among the Catholics there are many who are most conscientious Christians and who walk in all the light that shines upon them, and God will work in their behalf.”

The White Estate, official custodian of Ellen White’s writings, has for the past 75 years quietly applied a pragmatic policy on this matter. “We leave the matter of the use of terms designating the Catholic Church to the individual fields,” the trustees voted in 1949. “In those places where it is deemed that the present terminology of *The Great Controversy* on this point would be offensive, the Trustees are agreed to the substitution of terms which do not in any way change the meaning.” (This formula cries out for explanation. How can one change words without “in any way” changing the meaning? The point of the change, after all, was to improve the expression—that is, change or clarify the meaning.) They recommended the original wording be retained in places where “the present wording is not offensive.” It is safe to say that few American Adventists are aware that *The Great Controversy* reads somewhat differently in Spanish or German. But as the prophet told the school board: “Circumstances alter conditions.”

### THE DEBATE OVER “THE DAILY”

As Ellen White lived out her implied principles of interpretation, she went well beyond softening brutally blunt language or simply recognizing that ideals could not always be reached. In the case of one long-forgotten episode—the early twentieth-century debate over “the new view of ‘the daily’”—she rejected what appeared to be a clear and straightforward reading of her own statement on an obscure theological point. But she was not imitating the poetic exuberance of Walt Whitman: “Do I contradict

myself? Very well, then I contradict myself." She often had a much harder time admitting change than did the poet. But as a living prophet, she was able to say, in effect, to people who were sure that they were protecting her: "You are making my statement say more than it was intended to say. You have forgotten *why* I said that. You are piling on heavy baggage that my words cannot bear. Don't use me that way."

The "daily" was a term used in Daniel 8:13: "How long shall be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden underfoot?" The answer, famous in Adventism, came in the next verse, Daniel 8:14, which was the center of Millerite time-setting and our later understanding of the sanctuary: "Unto two thousand and three hundred days." The word "sacrifice" was italicized in the King James Version, indicating that it was supplied as part of the implied meaning of the Hebrew word translated simply "the daily."

Even before adopting the name, "Seventh-day Adventist," early Adventists taught that "the daily" referred to activities of Pagan Rome. In this, they were following the teachings of William Miller. By the early twentieth century, however, certain influential denominational leaders began promoting a new understanding: the taking away of "the daily" meant the promotion of a false view of Christ's mediation in the heavenly sanctuary—the destructive work, they said, of Papal Rome.

Proponents of the old view thought they had irrefutable support in a statement of Ellen White. In *Early Writings* she had declared "I saw in relation to the 'daily' . . . that the word 'sacrifice' was supplied by man's wisdom; and that the Lord gave the correct interpretation to those who gave the judgement hour cry [in 1844]." As the authors of one widely circulated tract declared, the "new view of the 'daily' . . . squarely contradicts the Spirit of Prophecy," which was the church's "infallible interpreter of the Word of God." The new view, they insisted would undermine the Adventist sanctuary doctrine.

Once again, "Sister White" responded in a way that surprised both sides—and required a living prophet. In several 1910 statements, she asked that her writings "not be used as the leading argument to settle questions over which there is now so much controversy," insisting that she did not have any instruction from the Lord on the correct interpretation of "the daily." She did not want her work to be weighed and found wanting based on an inflexible interpretation of one rather obscure text. In effect, as Bert Haloviak noted, she was telling both sides of the debate that in her *Early Writings* statement she was not using the term "the daily" in "a technical, theological sense, but rather in a broader setting." So far, the proponents of the new view, including her son W. C. White, could take satisfaction in her intervention. But then she proceeded to perplex both sides, declaring the argument over "the daily" was a minor matter, and calling for silence from the reinterpreters as well as

the traditionalists. One of the young reformers, later General Conference president, was relieved: "I am very glad she did not indorse the new opinion, for that is not what is needed." In words that might be applied to many later debates, he added: "We do not want any infallible declaration as to our own views about it, for we shall study more and learn more."

Willie White summarized the whole brouhaha with remarkable insight. He told a colleague that there were two questions more important than who was right about Daniel 8:13. "The first is, How shall we deal with one another when there is a difference of opinion? Second, How shall we deal with Mother's writings in our effort to settle doctrinal questions."

In the end, Mother had definite insight on each question. She steadfastly opposed all attempts to make her writings, rather than the Bible, the final arbitrator of theological controversy—although she did not hesitate to dictate key Adventist priorities and policies. She could also advise her most vehement defenders to distinguish between major and minor matters, to avoid dogmatism, and to know when to keep silent. "Circumstances change the relation of things."

### DISRUPTING PAST UNDERSTANDINGS

Her leadership cannot be reduced, however, to a simple yearning for harmony. When necessary (that is, when something vitally important was at stake), she was ready to change, even disrupt, past understandings. For example, her statement about Christ's divinity in *The Desire of Ages* was clearly trinitarian: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived. . . . The divinity of Christ is the believer's assurance of eternal life." This was a distinct contrast to the understanding of many Adventist pioneers, including James White.

At least one admirer of Ellen White had to see the "original autographs" before he would believe that these were the prophet's words. Even today, the unorthodox fringe of Adventism is uneasy with this statement, and they resort to special pleading and far-fetched exegesis to explain it away. It is seldom noted that this powerful phrase is adapted, shall we say, from a book on the Gospel of John written by the Scottish clergyman, John Cumming. This source declared (thirty years before *The Desire of Ages*): "In him was life—that is, original, unborrowed, underived. In us there is a streamlet from the Fountain of Life; in him was the Fountain of Life."

The derivative nature of Ellen White's words, though unfortunate in a writer assumed to be original, is not relevant to the validity of her teaching and preaching on the Trinity. The borrowing masked a completely original enterprise—leading the denomination from an incomplete understanding of Jesus to an insight firmly rooted in the history of Christianity. She used whatever tools were handy to nudge

her fellow sectarians into the heart of the Christian tradition. If an anti-trinitarian had discovered her "literary debts," pointing out that awkward fact would not have closed the debate. Neither would quoting Cumming rebut the trinitarian position. In the same way, one could not have discredited the Civil Rights Movement by showing that a fiery sermon by Martin Luther King borrowed some of its most potent words from some other preacher.

Too much of what passes for interpretation of Ellen White's life and work has simply been a matter of assuming the answers, of deducing what must have happened from principles of interpretation created by us, not by the prophet. If, instead, we began with events and actions and tried inductively to find a pattern, we might come up with a very different understanding. Indeed, this inductive approach might result in principles of interpretation like those established by Ellen White herself.

### THE PROPHET AND THE PRESS

In 2014, the denomination decided to close the oldest Adventist printing facility, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, started by James White. On the surface, this decision was directly contrary to the counsel of Ellen White. "Warnings have been given to me that it is not wise to consolidate the Pacific Press with the Review and Herald publishing house," she declared. Yet if we allow her to enter today's discussion, muttering with some asperity, "Circumstances alter conditions," we could well discover that applying her counsel in new situations demands change, and the apparent contradiction evaporates.

Church leaders chose not to explain their actions in this way, but surrendered to economic reality without taking the trouble to engage her old counsel in public or demonstrate how the prophet's counsel could change over time. What appeared to be disobedience could well have been exactly consistent with the spirit of the prophetic instruction—just as Adventists might appropriately invite seven-year-olds to attend church school or change the terminology in *The Great Controversy*, or expand our understanding of "the law," or reinterpret an ancient prophecy.

In the process of intense debate about merging the two remaining publishing houses, a small taskforce produced a "study document" entitled, "Understanding and Applying to Current Situations the Ellen G. White Counsels (1880-1910) Regarding Pacific Press and Review and Herald Publishing Houses." After the ad hoc committee disbanded, the working paper was not published or discussed by the church as a whole. The deciders did not explain their decision, though the study document had the potential of setting a precedent for future choices. The study document was, in fact, a classic case study in how to interpret Ellen White, a document that deserves to be more widely known.

As static declarations, divorced from any historical context, Ellen White's statements were crystal clear. "There should be no controversy on this point," she stated. "There must be no more determined binding up with interests in the publishing house in Battle Creek, so that it shall absorb the Pacific Press, making them one organ. The Pacific Press must stand by itself." Using the formula "the Lord has shown me," she spoke in language that seemed unequivocal. Review and Herald and Pacific Press "are to be kept as separate as two branches which, though distinct, both center in the parent vine. They are not to be merged into one, but are to be kept distinct, yet each to receive its nourishment from the same source."

Yet in the end, the printing presses at Review and Herald, like the machinery of the Southern Publishing Association in 1980, fell silent. The study document insisted that this action was not only necessary, but basically consistent with the principles of Ellen White's earlier counsel. With "careful thought" and appropriate "respect," those advocating for closing Review and Herald Publishing had succeeded, they insisted, in appropriately applying White's "principles in vastly different circumstances."

In the world of 2014, Ellen White's warnings against centralization, publishing secular books, unfair treatment of workers and authors, remained useful. What had changed was so dramatic, however, that her admonitions and reproof could not be applied blindly, as if the circumstances of a century ago still fit perfectly. Respecting Ellen White meant looking for perennial principles in a changing environment. "Applying her counsel" entailed listening to her and to those she rebuked and understanding the reasoning behind their business decisions. It meant treating her words as living insights, not frozen pronouncements, requiring no interpretation by honest believers.

Ellen White's counsels assumed an environment in which the publishing houses were not church-owned and relied heavily on non-religious publishing for their profits. A handful of men controlled the Review and Herald, and they were quite prepared to create a steeply graduated pay scale, demand more from workers, and cut authors' royalties, if necessary to survive. In this context, an expansionist mentality sought to take control of the independent west-coast publisher, exercising what she condemned as "kingly power."

The challenges of the twenty-first century were very different. The study document explained that publishing and manufacturing were often separated in today's world. Indeed, many "publishers" do not own printing presses. Moreover, the distribution of the church's printed products could not rely on "tract societies" or colporteurs as was the case in Ellen White's lifetime. The prophet's warning against a few men controlling all publishing decisions would not be fulfilled by having only one printing establishment, since such decisions were already "quite diversified,"

and independent ministries, universities, and union conferences publish their own books and journals. (No one, now, is prepared to pay authors the generous royalties that Ellen White considered simple equity.)

In short, any serious use of Ellen White's ideas, any attempt to apply her principles in a new situation, had to recognize that her world had disappeared. To simply announce, in bumper-sticker fashion, "Mrs. White said it, and I believe it," risked making her prophetic role irrelevant. "God wants us all to have common sense," she might have said to any such supporter.

## DEAD AND ALIVE

We began this chapter by pretending that Ellen White died in 1884. In doing so, we discovered a great deal about her actual role as a prophet. With her contemporaries, we found that she was not easy to control or predict. From this thought experiment, we learned how unwise it is to deduce from general principles what *she must have done*. Time and again, she surprised her contemporaries—and us—by rejecting plausible but inaccurate use of her messages or interpretations that ignored the role of change in her ministry. At unexpected moments, the prophet rebuked favored protegees or tolerated inconvenient new light.

We may conclude this essay by pretending that she is alive. Anything less, and the prophet is frozen in time, unable to explain or change. "Believing in her" often requires that we follow her lead in replacing an outmoded view with a clearer one. If we talk about the *spirit* of prophecy, we should not then insist on an unchanging *letter* of prophecy. As Seventh-day Adventists attempt to apply the providential counsel of the past on subjects ranging from health and education to "last things" and holy living, we need to exercise our historical imagination and create moments of continuing conversation with Ellen White. For today's believers, that is the only way to reclaim the prophet.

## FOR FURTHER READING

- There is a rich literature about "1888 and all that." The most recent contribution is Denis Fortin's, *G. I. Butler: An Honest But Misunderstood Church Leader* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2023). This biography brilliantly recreates the conflict from the perspective of a respectful, reluctant opponent of Ellen White.
- For a transcript of the 1904 school board minutes (and introductory comments by the chairman of the White Estate board), see *Review and Herald*, April 24, 1975.
- Juan Carlos Viera's slender volume, *The Voice of the Spirit: How God Has Led His People Through the Gift of Prophecy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998) has valuable insights on the translation of *The Great Controversy*. The far-reaching implications of his work have been neglected by most writers on Ellen White.
- On "the daily," see Bert Haloviak's unpublished, comprehensive article "Pioneers,

Pantheists, and Progressives: A. F. Ballenger and Divergent Paths to the Sanctuary," which was presented but not discussed at the Glacier View Conference of 1980.

- John Cumming's, *Sabbath Evening Reading on the New Testament: St. John* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856) was part of Ellen White's Elmshaven Library, which has been recreated at the Walter C. Utt Center, Pacific Union College.
- "Understanding and Applying to Current Situations the Ellen G. White Counsels (1880-1910) Regarding Pacific Press and Review and Herald Publishing Houses." It is dated July 25, 2013.
- One example of the "counter-factual" genre of historical writing is Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999).



## How to Believe In Ellen White

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*The custodians [of a tradition] do not always know who their best friends are.*

—Martin Marty, 1979

*"At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But [the angel] said to me, 'No, not that! I am but a fellow-servant with you and your brothers who bear their testimony to Jesus. It is God you must worship. Those who bear testimony to Jesus are inspired like the prophets."*

—Revelation 19:10, NEB.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# WHAT MY TEACHERS NEVER TAUGHT ME

George R. Knight

*History is bunk.* – Henry Ford

*History is not bunk.* – Ellen G. White

*History is bunk.* – Many Ellen White devotees<sup>88</sup>

**A**s a college student, I was taught about an Ellen White who never existed. I was introduced to a prophet who was inerrant and infallible, whose writings could and should be used to do theology and biblical interpretation and even history and science, who was a hundred years ahead of her time, whose books came straight from heaven through divine revelation, whose life was essentially flawless, and who was probably verbally inspired.

Only later did I discover that she herself did not believe or advocate those claims. Nor did her most alert followers. Then, we need to ask, why did so many of my teachers hold those ideas so dearly? Because, to put it bluntly, they did not know any better; because Adventism had forgotten or chose to ignore significant historical facts related to Ellen White and her writings. That was bad enough, but over time, and bit by bit, an alternative view of “truth” was substituted for reality.

It makes a huge difference whether accurate history is bunk or if it is our only safe guide into the future. More than half a century of historical research has painfully recovered the truth that Ellen White never denied and that her closest contemporary followers believed.<sup>89</sup> As a result, we are now on firmer ground as we move into the future on a platform that provides for the proper use of her writings to bless our lives and guide our church. Of course, individual readers or even the entire denomination, may still choose fiction over truth and call it “faithfulness.” But doing so is the very apex of rejecting both the prophet and her work.

## THE ELLEN WHITE PERSPECTIVE

One fascinating aspect of Adventist history is that so much about the nature of Ellen White's work was forgotten in the years after her death. That fact set the denomination up for an Ellen White crisis in the 1970s. But, as noted earlier, Ellen White herself and many of her most enlightened colleagues clearly saw the problems that would be created if people claimed too much for her work. Foremost among that group was W. C. White, the son who worked extremely close to her for the last twenty-five years of her life.

In the wake of the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* and S. N. Haskell's reaction against the changes that had been made, W. C. White wrote,

I believe, Brother Haskell, that there is danger of our injuring Mother's work by claiming for it more than she claims for it, more than Father ever claimed for it, more than Elder[s] Andrews, Waggoner, or Smith ever claimed for it. I cannot see consistency in our putting forth a claim of verbal inspiration when Mother does not make any such claim, and I certainly think we will make a great mistake if we lay aside historical research and endeavor to settle historical questions by the use of Mother's books as an authority when she herself does not wish them to be used in any such way.

It is of great significance to realize that Ellen White saw the same dangers. At the end of one copy of her son's letter, we find the following handwritten note: "I approve of the remarks made in this letter. Ellen G. White."<sup>90</sup>

Questions related to verbal inspiration came up repeatedly during her lifetime. One of great interest developed in the early 1880s when it was decided to republish the first four volumes of *Testimonies for the Church*. That in itself was good, but since the new edition would be edited, a problem arose in many minds as to how inspired words could be changed. That crisis in understanding led the 1883 General Conference session to vote, "We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed." Those sentiments were Ellen White's personal position.<sup>91</sup>

While that understanding of her inspiration reflected her position, there were many who continued to maintain just the opposite. One illustration of that is correspondence in 1906 between Ellen White and Dr. David Paulson, the founder of Hinsdale Sanitarium. On April 19 he wrote to her, "I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that every word that you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under any and all circumstances, was as inspired as the ten commandments. I held that view with absolute tenacity against innumerable objections

raised to it by many who were occupying prominent positions in the cause." He wanted to know if he should continue to hold that position.<sup>92</sup>

"My brother," she answered, "you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claim. Neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause have made such claims." She went on to explain to him that there were both divine and human elements in inspiration, and that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is "conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language."<sup>93</sup>

Closely related to verbal inspiration is the topic of inerrancy (the idea that inspired writings are free from error). That issue arose with the revision of *The Great Controversy* in 1911 during which some of the facts were changed with her approval due to advances in historical research. While some readers had problems with that, Ellen White did not. For her, inspired writings were "an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will,"<sup>94</sup> rather than being infallible on every topic they touched.

A second set of ideas on which Ellen White and those who worked closest to her were clear was that her works should not be viewed as a divinely inspired commentary on the Bible and that they should not be used to settle doctrinal issues. Those issues arose during the 1888 era when G. I. Butler, president of the General Conference, and others sought to use her writings to settle the arguments being hotly disputed over the identity of the law in Galatians and the ten horns of Daniel 7.

Ellen White flatly declined attempts to settle the disputed points by appealing to her writings. She even went so far as to imply to the delegates at the 1888 General Conference session on October 24 that it was providential that she had lost her testimony to J. H. Waggoner, a testimony that had purportedly resolved the nature of the law in Galatians once and for all in the 1850s. "God has a purpose in this," she asserted, "He wants us to go to the Bible and get the Scripture evidence." And when J. H. Morrison read several passages from her *Sketches From the Life of Paul* to "prove" Butler's interpretation of the Galatian's law, Ellen White was unimpressed.<sup>95</sup>

A similar situation arose twenty years later in the divisive controversy over the meaning of the "daily" in Daniel 8. At that time Haskell and others held that "we ought to understand such expressions by the aid of the Spirit of Prophecy." Ellen White took vigorous exception to that approach. "I entreat of Elders Haskell, Loughborough, Smith, and others of our leading brethren," she wrote, "that they make no reference to my writings to sustain their views of 'the daily' . . . I cannot consent that any of my writings shall be taken as settling this matter."<sup>96</sup>

Ellen White consistently argued against the tendency of Adventists to solve doctrinal and biblical issues by referring to her writings. "The Bible," she repeatedly asserted throughout her ministry, "is the only rule of faith and doctrine."<sup>97</sup> James

White, her husband, was of the same mind as were A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, and many others who followed her leadership.

A third important idea on which Ellen White and her close associates were clear was that not everything in her works came straight from heaven in the form of divine revelation, but that she used historical and other sources in her writing. "In some cases," she penned in the introduction to the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy*, "where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but except in a few instances no specific credit has been given, since they are not quoted for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject."<sup>98</sup> Her basic claim was that God had revealed to her the spiritual dynamics of the controversy between Christ's and Satan's kingdoms, but that she went to the historians to provide the facts and to fill out the historical tapestry.

W. C. White, A. G. Daniells, and others were quite familiar with her use of sources. In 1928 White pointed out to L. E. Froom that "she admired the language in which other writers had presented to their readers the scenes which God had presented to her in vision, and she found it both a pleasure, and a convenience and an economy of time to use their language fully or in part in presenting those things which she knew through revelation, and which she wished to pass on to her readers."<sup>99</sup>

In a 1912 letter to W. W. Eastman, W. C. White indicated that his mother not only used Protestant historians of Christianity in the writing of her works but also the works of Adventist writers. Thus, he pointed out, "Mother found such perfect descriptions of events and presentations of facts and of doctrines written out in our denominational books, that she copied the words of these authorities."<sup>100</sup>

Daniells, president of the General Conference from 1901-1922, was also knowledgeable regarding Ellen White's use of sources, and he could be quite frank in his discussions of the issue. At the 1919 Bible Conference, for instance, he noted that "she never claimed to be an authority on history; and as I understood it, where the history that related to the interpretation of prophecy was clear and expressive, she wove it into her writings; but I have always understood that, as far as she was concerned, she was ready to correct in revision such statements as she thought should be corrected."<sup>101</sup>

One thing that should be noted before we move on from Ellen White's use of historical sources is that the Adventist clergy and laity of her time were in a general way familiar with many of the volumes from which she took material. That is not only true of Adventist authors and their writings, such as Uriah Smith's, *The Sanctuary and Its Cleansing*, James White's, *Life of William Miller*, and J. N. Andrews's,

*History of the Sabbath*, but also several non-Adventist authors, including J. H. Merle d'Aubigné's, *History of the Reformation*, and J. A. Wylie's, *History of the Waldenses*. Those last two, among others, were advertised in Adventist publications. In fact, within six weeks of the re-publication of Conybeare and Towson's *The Life and Epistles of Saint Paul*, (which Ellen White had used extensively) an advertisement for the work was featured in *Signs of the Times* with her endorsement. "The Life of St Paul [sic], by Conybeare and Howson," she wrote, "I regard as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history." She also personally recommended d'Aubigné's history to readers of the *Review* as "both interesting and profitable" for gaining knowledge of the Reformation.<sup>102</sup> Such exposures to her source materials would suggest that Ellen White and her contemporaries believed there was nothing to hide or fear regarding her use of them. Beyond that, through such familiarity, her contemporaries would have been much more conscious of overlap than the generation who would be seriously shaken in the 1970s by the rediscovery of her significant use of the material of others.

At this juncture, it is important to note that although Ellen White's most enlightened contemporaries were aware of, and in basic agreement with, her understanding of such topics as verbal inspiration, inerrancy, the use of her works in relation to the Bible and doctrine, and her use of historical sources, that does not mean that all were. We have already seen that S. N. Haskell argued vigorously for verbal inspiration and the validity of her works for historical detail. He battled until his death in arguing for the verbal position in spite of W. C. White's repeated pleas to him that he was wrong. "Do I believe that Sister White's writings are verbally inspired as much as the Bible?" Haskell wrote in 1919. "Yes; I do," he answered, supplying seven reasons why "he believed" in the "verbal inspiration of Sister White's writings." And the charismatic A. T. Jones shared many of the same views. "I must refer again to the attitude of A. T Jones," Daniells told the 1919 Bible Conference attendees. "In his heyday you know he just drank the whole thing in, and he would hang a man on a word. I have seen him take just a word in the *Testimonies* and hang to it, and that would settle everything."<sup>103</sup>

Jones also set the stage for the twentieth-century use of Ellen White as a commentary on the Bible. "The right use of the *Testimonies*," he wrote to the church in his 1894 Week of Prayer reading, "... is not to use them as they are in themselves, as though they were apart from the word of God in the Bible; but to study the Bible through them."<sup>104</sup>

An unfortunate fact of Adventist history is that even during Ellen White's lifetime there were serious divisions as to the nature and use of her writings, with many making unwarranted and extreme statements. In that context, W. C. White never ceased warning about the dangers of claiming too much for his mother and her

writings. That topic also came up during the very open and frank discussions of her work at the 1919 Bible Conference. Daniells, for example, pointed out that one way to hurt a student's relationship to Ellen White and her gift was "to take an extreme and unwarranted position" on her works. "You can do that . . . ; but when that student gets out and gets in contact with things [e.g., the facts], he may be shaken, and perhaps shaken clear out and away. I think we should be candid and honest and never put a claim forth that is not well founded." In a similar vein, J. N. Anderson asked that when we claimed too much for Ellen White, "Aren't we preparing for a crisis that will be very serious someday?"<sup>105</sup>

The plain fact is that the warning signs had been placed on the table by those who had worked closely with Ellen White. But it is also a fact that those signs were ignored and even suppressed (as in the case of the 1919 Bible Conference minutes) in the polarizing atmosphere of the 1920s by a new generation of leaders who were more distant in terms of immediate contact with the prophet and how she worked. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, mythology regarding her writings and her gift became dominant. And in the end, as W. C. White had predicted, it "hurt Mother's work." In fact, it hurt it much more than he probably expected.

Interestingly, it was the approach to Ellen White and her writings put forth by such leaders as A. T. Jones and S. N. Haskell that dominated Adventism after her death rather than her own perspective and that of her most perceptive colleagues. It was that distorted perspective with all its extremes that informed the education and thinking of my college Bible teachers. And those dedicated teachers passed it on to me and my classmates in the early 1960s. In short, they couldn't teach what they didn't know.

Before moving on, it would be well to summarize what I have titled the "Ellen White Perspective" and offer a few nuancing remarks regarding it. In short, Ellen White, in her clearest and most extensive statements, did not claim verbal inspiration or inerrancy for her writings. Beyond that, she repeatedly claimed that her writings should not be used to settle historical or biblical issues, but that the Bible was the only source of Christian doctrine. And in such books as *The Great Controversy* she frankly acknowledged her use of sources.

While those positions seemed to be clear to her, we need to remember that her contemporaries did not have access to many of her clearest statements on inspiration since they existed in unpublished documents that were not generally accessible at the time. In addition, she at times made offhand remarks related to inspiration that seem to contradict her clear statements made when she was specifically focusing on explaining issues related to inspiration. Beyond that, there were occasions when she had good opportunities for clarification on topics related to her inspiration, but didn't take advantage of them. Thus she herself is partly to blame

for some misunderstandings. A further fact that needs to be taken into consideration is that in some of her writings she was not as forthright regarding her use of sources as she was in the Introduction to *The Great Controversy*. As a result, even though Ellen White's basic perspective is clear, there have been genuine reasons for misunderstanding.

### THE LOSS OF THE ELLEN WHITE PERSPECTIVE

The 1919 Bible Conference represents the apex in openness regarding Ellen White and her work. But that openness had come at the wrong time. The 1920s witnessed the rise of the conflict between fundamentalism and liberalism in Protestantism, and in that polarizing context every Adventist leader who spoke openly at the conference would later lose his position, including A. G. Daniells who had been president of the General Conference for twenty-one years.

Daniells apparently deemed the discussions of the 1919 Bible Conference, with their very frank discussions of Ellen White's writings, to be too open. As a result, they were shelved in a vault and forgotten. They would not be rediscovered until 1974 and would not come to the notice of Adventist scholars until 1979, six decades after the event.

Meanwhile, there were good reasons for keeping the 1919 minutes under wraps as 1919 moved into the 1920s. In that decade the smoldering confrontation between Protestant liberals and fundamentalists came to an explosive head. And at the center of that confrontation were issues dealing with the inspiration of the Bible—especially verbal inspiration and inerrancy. The center of the struggle, as the fundamentalists saw it, was the concept of the Bible being completely trustworthy and authoritative in every respect. While the issue had been seething in the minds of conservative leaders since the turn of the century, it exploded in 1920 and would become the defining issue of the decade for American Protestantism. In Adventism, while no leaders taught a modernist interpretation of the Bible, the fundamentalist tensions, which had always existed in the denomination, came to revolve on whether the fundamentalist defense of biblical authority could, or should be, extended to Ellen White's writings.

It is in that loaded context that Claude E. Holmes and J. S. Washburn, two disgruntled Adventists who were still upset over the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* and the topic of the "daily," became vocal in April 1920. Their immediate targets were the 1919 Bible Conference and those who had spoken openly about the work and authority of Ellen White. On April 1, Holmes published a tract titled, "Have We an Infallible 'Spirit of Prophecy?'" His answer was a resounding yes. "There is a dangerous doctrine that is rapidly permeating the ranks of our people," Holmes noted in his opening sentence. "It is this: That Sister White is not an

authority on history. Some, as you know, go even further, and claim that she is not an authority on doctrine or health reform. That was practically the position taken last summer" at the 1919 Bible Conference. Whatever she wrote on any topic was fully divine and authoritative to Holmes. He closed his presentation by declaring that he stood "absolutely and uncompromisingly for the inspiration of Sister White's writings. I draw no line between the so-called human and divine; they are all Scripture to me."<sup>106</sup>

Two weeks later, Washburn published his open letter titled, "The Startling Omega and Its True Genealogy." That tract continued Holmes's argument. They had in their sights not only Daniells, Prescott, and others who had been frank and open in the 1919 discussions, but also W. C. White, who had not attended but who had claimed that his mother was not an authority on history.

Those two tracts were widely circulated at the 1922 General Conference session and were instrumental in unseating Daniells from the presidency. The times had changed, and those church leaders who had spoken openly about issues related to inspiration at the 1919 Conference found themselves in less influential jobs. The first post-Ellen White decade found Adventism largely with a new cadre of leaders who had not worked closely with Ellen White, but who had the advantage of being more in harmony with the spirit of the times.

In the polarized atmosphere of the 1920s, there was no place for theological neutrality. Adventism was being forced to choose between modernism and fundamentalism. Since no Adventist at that time would select liberalism, the only viable choice was the other extreme. The major casualty in that polarized era was the moderate and open approach to inspiration held by Ellen White and those who had worked most closely with her.

One result of that dynamic was Adventism's drift away from Ellen White's perspective on her concept of inspiration and the function of her writings. Included in that drift were not only such issues as verbal inspiration and inerrancy, but also the importance of her writings in such areas as history, science, and their role as an inspired commentary on Scripture and a determiner of doctrinal truth. For example, in 1926 B. L. House claimed in his textbook, sponsored by the General Conference, that "the selection of the very words of Scripture in the original languages was overruled by the Holy Spirit." And the influential F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald* from 1911 to 1944, noted at the 1946 General Conference session that not only were the writings of Ellen White a commentary on the Bible, but that "they are inspired commentaries, motivated by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and this places them in a separate and distinct class, far above all other commentaries." Those who do not see this, Wilcox added, reveal that they have "little if any faith in the doctrine of spiritual gifts in their application to the church today."<sup>107</sup>

By midcentury, the Wilcox position had become by far the dominant one in the church. So much so that the extensive *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (1953-1957) not only brought Ellen White's thoughts into the discussion of many verses, but also had a section for unpublished and out-of-print Ellen White remarks at the end of each volume as well as a list, after the discussion of each biblical chapter, of references to her usage of various Bible texts in her major published books. Thus, that important reference work led people to see her writings more than ever as an inspired commentary on the Bible.

In summary, the decades after the death of Ellen White witnessed a decided shift in the understanding of the majority of Adventist leadership toward the assumptions of the 1920s fundamentalists. And even though they were not formally stated, those assumptions permeated Adventist thinking and became intertwined with the current of fundamentalist ideas on inspiration that had always been present in the thinking of many, if not most, Adventists throughout the denomination's history. In the decade of the twenties the majority of Adventists took the fundamentalist assumptions on the inspiration of the Bible and applied them to the writings of Ellen White.

As a result, the Ellen White perspective had been lost, and a new perspective had been established—a perspective she had rejected during her own life. And that new perspective was more closely related to the views of A. T. Jones, S. N. Haskell, Claude Holmes, and J. S. Washburn than to those of Ellen White, James White, W. C. White, and A. G. Daniells. It was that new viewpoint that formed the understanding of my college Bible teachers during their own educational experience in the 1940s. They never taught me the truth about Ellen White and her writings, because they never knew it.

## EXPLOSIVE RESEARCH

You can bury truth for only so long. If it is truth, indeed, it will eventually resurface as thinking people carefully read the historical record. That was the case in Ellen White studies. By the beginning of the 1970s Adventism had developed a new generation of young, professionally trained historians and other scholars who had begun to ask more exacting questions regarding the denomination and its prophet.

The autumn 1970 issue of *Spectrum* (a recently founded quarterly for the scholarly study of Adventism) witnessed Roy Branson and Herold Weiss, both professors at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, calling for scholarly study of Ellen White's writings. One of the first to undertake that challenge was Andrews University historian, Donald McAdams, who undertook a very exacting, multi-year study of Ellen White's use of historical sources in the chapters on the English Reformation and John Huss in *The Great Controversy*.

To put it mildly, McAdams arrived at some unsettling conclusions. “The historical portions of *The Great Controversy* that I have examined,” he wrote, “are selective abridgements and adaptations of historians. Ellen White was not just borrowing paragraphs here and there that she ran across in her reading, but in fact following the historians page after page, leaving out much material, but using their sequence, some of their ideas, and often their words.” That usage at times included their “historical errors.”<sup>108</sup>

McAdams balanced his research findings with Ellen White’s own statements in the Introduction to *The Great Controversy*. First, he pointed out, she had noted that “it is not so much the object of this book to present new truths concerning the struggles of former times, as to bring out facts and principles which have a bearing on coming events.” And second, she freely told her readers that she had used the overviews and even the words of historians when their statements, as she put it, provided “a ready and forcible presentation of the subject.” As a result, McAdams could write in 1980 that he believed “the evidence is compatible with Ellen White’s statements claiming inspiration regarding historical events and describing her use of Protestant historians.” Ben McArthur noted, in his 2008 analysis of McAdams’s viewpoint, that Ellen White’s inspiration “lies not in the history she summarizes but in the religious meaning she imparts to it, the contest between God and Satan.”<sup>109</sup>

McAdams did not publish his findings until 2022. Desiring to work with the White Estate and the leaders of the church, he shared his research with them and entered into a dialogue that extended through much of the 1970s. He eventually summarized the results of his work and that of others in a 1980 article, “Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen G. White Studies in the 1970s.”

Much more problematic than McAdams for the White Estate and the church was the approach of Ronald Numbers, who was the grandson of a General Conference president. While McAdams was at least friendly to the idea of inspiration, Numbers discounted the concept and adopted a naturalistic perspective. Beyond that, he decided to publish immediately. Harper and Row released his *Prophetess of Health* in 1976. Numbers argued that Ellen White was not only a child of her times regarding many of her ideas on health, but also that she had drawn from the ideas of health reformers of her day and often copied from them. The most damning finding for Numbers was that, based on textual comparison, he had concluded that she had lied about her use of certain sources. In that conclusion Numbers went beyond literary issues to challenging Ellen White’s integrity as a person.

The years following 1976 saw a continuing examination of Ellen White and her work. One endeavor along that line was that of Walter Rea, an Adventist pastor. Rea’s research had led him to the conclusion that Ellen White’s borrowing in such books as *The Desire of Ages* and *Patriarchs and Prophets* was extensive, but not

admitted. In response to Rea's claim, Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, appointed a well-qualified committee to meet with Rea and examine his evidence. While some committee members found Rea's research lacking in scholarly precision, the committee as a whole was convinced that her borrowing from contemporary works was more widespread than previously believed.

The results of the committee would be far reaching. At the top of the list was the conclusion "that we recognize that Ellen White, in her writing, used various sources more extensively than we had previously believed." That troubling fact led the committee to make two important recommendations. The first was that the church leaders and the laity be educated concerning the extent and implications of Ellen White's use of sources. The second was "that an in-depth study on the writing of *The Desire of Ages* . . . be implemented, and that some suitable person, working under the supervision of a broad-based committee, be asked to foster the project."<sup>110</sup>

In 1982, Rea published his findings in *The White Lie*. His title reflects an extension and magnification of Numbers' accusation of her dishonesty. For Rea, her whole corpus of writings was becoming a lie. For him and others, it was not only her writings that had become problematic, but also her integrity as a person.

The combined effect of the books by Numbers and Rea, along with the *Spectrum* articles, was the intellectual equivalent of throwing a bomb into what had become, since the 1920s, the "settled understanding" of Ellen White and her gift. That "settled understanding" had been the perspective of my college teachers. It was the only understanding they had. They had not been in a position to pass on to me and my classmates that which they did not know.

The revolutionary discoveries of the 1970s, while they had exposed the shortcomings of the post-Ellen White perspective, had not sought to provide a full understanding of what I have labeled the "Ellen White Understanding." And that shortfall is certainly understandable. It is only natural that those who had begun their serious study of Ellen White with inflated ideas of her inerrancy, exclusive dependence upon revelation in her writings, and "perfect" character, among other issues, would not only react, but overreact, when they found their inherited and firmly believed understandings to be in error.

There is an important lesson here—namely, that claiming too much for Ellen White and her writings eventually leads to disaster. W. C. White saw that point clearly in 1912 in meeting S. N. Haskell's overblown ideas.

## RECOVERING THE ELLEN WHITE PERSPECTIVE

The title of this section could have been "How to Straighten Out My Teachers After the Shock of the 1970s." The shock of McAdams, Numbers, Rea, and others was a first step in correcting our understanding. But it was only a part of the story as the

denomination sought a balanced understanding of Ellen White and her gift.

A significant signal that Adventism was ready to take a major step forward in its understanding of Ellen White and her work was delivered to the church in March 1980 when General Conference president, Neal Wilson, published an article in the *Adventist Review* on his position concerning Ellen White. The 1970s had been a difficult decade, and the leaders of the denomination and the officials of the White Estate had very reluctantly come to accept the conclusions of the committee appointed to investigate the work of Walter Rea and the findings of other researchers. But the new White Estate director, Robert Olson, was in agreement with McAdams that the facts needed to be faced responsibly. In his article (published two months after the committee met with Rea) Wilson also owned up to that truth. He then went on to set forth and illustrate five points related to the prophetic gift: “1. Originality is not a test of inspiration. . . . 2. God inspires people, not words. . . . 3. The Holy Spirit helps the messenger to select his material carefully. . . . 4. The prophet’s use of existing materials does not necessarily mean that the prophet is dependent upon these sources. . . . 5. Whenever we recognize similarities we must also see the dissimilarities.”<sup>111</sup>

In response, McAdams noted that Wilson’s statement “is [the] most significant article to appear in the *Review* in this century. The president of the General Conference is openly and honestly acknowledging the facts about Ellen White’s use of sources and pointing the church toward a definition of inspiration that will be new to most Adventists and threatening to some.”<sup>112</sup> Wilson’s honesty also must have been a reinforcement to McAdams personally since he had spent much of a decade “diplomatically” seeking to convince the denomination’s leadership that the traditional views on Ellen White were untenable. The cumulative effect of the work of McAdams, Numbers, and Rea could not be avoided. At last, even the denomination’s president was willing to admit that the time had come to investigate more thoroughly the work of Ellen White and the implications for the church’s understanding of inspiration.

The almost half century since Neal Wilson’s statement recognizing the problem of how our understanding of Ellen White’s work had gone wrong has been characterized by a multitude of studies, articles, books, and seminars attempting to “get at” the real Ellen White and her perspective on her gift and writings. This current chapter is not the place to examine that intellectual journey. But in chapter five of *Ellen White’s Afterlife*, I have outlined the major lines of study from 1980 up through 2019. And yet the exploration goes on as a new generation of researchers seeks to educate not only the church, but also its future college teachers so that they will have better information to pass on to their students than mine had for me. Unfortunately, that knowledge has not filtered down to most of the denomination’s

members or even its leadership. In fact, many deliberately hold on to the post-Ellen White perspective even after they have been exposed to its shortcomings.

That thought brings me back to “bunkism.” Did Henry Ford really say that “history is bunk”? Probably not, but he came very close to believing it. Did Ellen White ever say “history is not bunk”? Definitely not. But she did write that “we have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”<sup>113</sup> Those are hardly the words of one who believes history is unimportant or nonsense. Have a large number of Ellen White’s devotees ever claimed that “history is bunk”? I doubt it. But from the perspective of paying no attention to the work of the past half century that has sought to recapture Ellen White’s own perspective and by their avoidance and even rejection of the findings of that research they demonstrate a “bunkish” attitude. But in so doing, as I noted earlier, they exist at the very apex of rejecting both the prophet and her work. They demonstrate by that neglect their concept that history is indeed bunk, and in so doing they transmute faithfulness into faithlessness, all the while proclaiming that they are the true followers of Ellen White.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# TURNING POINTS

Donald R. McAdams

*"In our estimate of the spirit of prophecy, isn't its value to us more in the spiritual light it throws into our own hearts and lives than in the intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters?"*

—H. Camden Lacey, 1919 Bible Conference

### INTRODUCTION

Understanding Ellen White's spiritual gift has been a challenge for every generation of Adventists. Her personal witness was powerful, her voice compelling, and her visions affirmed what the "Little Flock" believed to be true. Then came her testimonies, filled with encouragement, correction, and direction for leaders and a growing church; and finally, her articles and books, filled with wise counsel for living the Christian life and the grand sweep of history from the fall of Satan to the earth made new.

And yet there were problems. Sometimes Sister White, as she was called, seemed to judge unfairly. Sometimes in response to changing circumstances she revised her writings. And over time close associates became aware that much of what she wrote could be traced back to other people's books, all this despite her claim that she was God's messenger and that her testimonies and books were based on divine revelation. Understanding the authority of White's spiritual gift became a challenge and has remained one to this day.

A comprehensive examination of this challenge would require a book. This chapter simply reviews five turning points—times when evidence showed that the prevailing view of White's gift needed to be revised. Three occurred during White's own lifetime. Each time, she herself authorized slight turns. The two turning points in the years after her death in 1915 were the period following the 1919 Bible Conference and the 1970s and 1980s. On both occasions there was no turn.

Why is this history important? Because today, once again, church leaders face a turning point. This time the need to turn is simply the accumulated weight of

Ellen White research. Building on the research that began in the 1970s, historians have enriched vastly our understanding of White.<sup>114</sup> The Angwin Appeal of October 22, 2023 is a recognition that what historians of Adventism know today the world church will know tomorrow. It is time, past time, to acknowledge the limits of White's authority and focus on the value of her writings for their wise counsel on Christian living and devotional power.

### 1883—VERBAL INSPIRATION

There is no evidence that Ellen White ever claimed inspiration for her every word, though in her later years she made it clear that from time to time the Holy Spirit helped her select words.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, during the early decades of her ministry most Adventist leaders and members held the view that almost every word was sacred. Verbal inspiration was still an issue in 1882-1883 when controversy broke out in response to a proposed new edition of the *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>116</sup>

What we might call the first edition of the *Testimonies* was a series of nineteen pamphlets published between 1855 and 1871. James White re-published all these pamphlets in six volumes, completing the work in 1879. In this second edition James made minor changes in wording, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Apparently, there were no objections. James died in 1881, leaving to his second son, William C. White, the responsibility of being Ellen's literary manager. A year later, the second edition of the *Testimonies* depleted, W. C. White decided to publish a third edition, leaving the editorial work to his mother's two literary assistants, his wife, Mary Kelsey White, and Marian Davis.

In December 1882, with the first nine pamphlets nearly finished, W. C. asked General Conference president George I. Butler, and Adventist pioneer S. N. Haskell, to review the printer's proofs. Butler's response was, "We see no good in a third of these changes." Haskell agreed. W. C. pushed back. "There is no salvation in bad grammar," he said. "A thought grammatically expressed is just as good." But Butler was unmoved. "That may be so, but before your wife makes any more changes in these *Testimonies*, I wish she could go with us into meetings with our critics and see them attack your mother's writings. They bring forward one edition and then another, show up changes and try to make a point of them."<sup>117</sup>

With some trepidation, Mary and Marian continued work on the *Testimonies*, keeping changes to a minimum. Mary wrote her husband on January 7, 1883, "The fear that we may make too many changes or in some way change the sense haunts me day and night."<sup>118</sup> Their trepidation was warranted. Several times, under heavy pressure from Butler and two editors at the Review and Herald Publishing House, George Amadon and Uriah Smith, W. C. almost stopped the work. On October 5 he wrote to his wife, "We may prepare ourselves for a storm when these books come out, for it will

come, and you and I will catch it, on the changes but more especially on the omissions on account of needless repetition. Our enemies will make great capital of this I fear."<sup>119</sup>

The battle to get the new edition of the *Testimonies* approved by the General Conference session (November 1883) began with a presentation by W. C. to a pre-session ministerial meeting. In response to his explanations for the changes that had been made, the ministers appointed a committee of thirty to examine the changes. The committee met the next morning in the Review and Herald chapel. Some approved of the changes. Others were in bitter opposition. Finally, that afternoon, Ellen intervened with some remarks. We do not know whether she spoke directly to the committee or had her comments relayed, and there is no record of her words. One wonders why Ellen waited so long to speak. One also wonders why the ministers were so disturbed by the proposed revisions.

We know that White had been making revisions in her writings starting with the second printing of her first vision on April 6, 1846.<sup>120</sup> And clearly these revisions had troubled some, for as early as 1867 she had written in the *Review and Herald*: "Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing out my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be spoken by an angel, which I always endorse in marks of quotation."<sup>121</sup>

Obviously, this statement had not settled the matter. And how could White have thought it would? She was dependent on the Spirit of the Lord for her views, and though she used her own words to express these views, nevertheless her writings, which are simply the effective use of words, were dependent on the Holy Spirit.

White's remarks to the committee must also have been somewhat ambiguous for the committee still felt obliged to examine in great detail the changes in the new *Testimonies*. Eighteen teams of two examined assigned testimonies, over a thousand pages in all, and a five-member Committee of Reference received the reports of the teams. In the end, though the edits were in the thousands, the Committee of Reference found only twenty changes that caused concern, and on close examination some of these were not problematic.

Finally, on November 20, to William C. White's relief, since just a few hours earlier he had expected the vote to condemn the revisions,<sup>122</sup> the General Conference session approved by resolution the revisions in the *Testimonies*. The session also approved a resolution that for the first time defined inspiration:

*Whereas*, Many of these testimonies were written under the most unfavorable circumstances, the writer being too heavily pressed with anxiety and labor to devote critical thought to the grammatical perfection of the writings, and they were printed in such haste as to allow these imperfections to pass uncorrected; and—

*Whereas*, We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed; therefore—

*Resolved*, That in the republication of these volumes such verbal changes be made as to remove the above named imperfections, as far as possible, without in any measure changing the thought.<sup>123</sup>

Two questions jump out from this 1883 General Conference session. First, from whence came the belief that everything White wrote was based on visions and that not even words could be changed, and why was this issue still a problem in 1883? White's first vision was in December 1844, yet almost forty years later proposing cosmetic revisions in her *Testimonies* sparked major controversy, and approving revisions required a resolution by the General Conference in session.

Second, why was White so reluctant to be transparent about how her writings were produced? She waited until the last minute to intervene in an issue that was dividing church leaders when a clear statement early on would have settled the matter. And when she did speak, rather than make an unambiguous, open declaration, she made a few unrecorded remarks (to whom we don't know) that still left room for disagreement.

Whatever our questions, it is clear that in 1883, when church leaders reached a turning point, they turned. Verbal inspiration was specifically rejected, and thought inspiration by the Holy Spirit, with the prophet left to select her own words, was declared to be the official position of the Adventist Church. Would church leaders have taken this turn without White's approval? Most likely not.

## 1888—SOURCES

The second turning point was over the issue of sources. If the Holy Spirit was the source for White's writings, why did those writings so closely mirror the writings of others? This pattern was noticed by Joseph Bates at the very beginning of White's ministry. In November 1846 young Ellen, in relating a vision to Bates who was still dubious about her claims, described some details of the solar system and what appeared to be a hole in the constellation Orion. As a retired sea captain Bates was familiar with celestial navigation, and there was much interest in astronomy at the time because of a newly built, 72-inch telescope. Images were circulating widely, and Bates himself had described some in a recent pamphlet, *The Opening of the Heavens*. He was astounded when White assured him that she knew nothing of all this, that all she knew about astronomy was what she had seen in vision.<sup>124</sup>

This became her standard response when others noticed similarities in her

writings with published sources. In the decades that followed, White always responded that she was not acquainted with these sources when she wrote out her visions. Were parallel passages just a coincidence or perhaps a form of multiple inspiration?<sup>125</sup> It was not until the late 1880s that Ellen White acknowledged that she was familiar with the books of others and had quoted and paraphrased from them. It was a second turning point, but an insufficient one as it turned out.<sup>126</sup>

The occasion was the publication of two new books by White: *Sketches from the Life of Paul* in 1883 and *The Great Controversy* in 1884. Careful readers observed that these two books borrowed heavily from W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of Saint Paul*, J. H. Merle D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, and James A. Wylie, *History of the Waldenses*. Adventists were familiar with these books, because they had either been recommended by White herself or pushed by the publishing houses as premiums for subscriptions to the *Review* or *Signs of the Times*.

How does one explain this? The simplest explanation is that White saw no need to hide her use of these historians, because she considered it appropriate. Yes, she had failed to mark and cite quotations and close paraphrases, which was a mistake, but why could not an inspired author use the words of historians if these words helped her tell her story?

J. H. Kellogg, in an interview with G. W. Amadon and A. C. Bourdeau on October 7, 1907, recalled that when the 1884 *The Great Controversy* came out, almost immediately somebody called his attention to the sources:

I could not help but know about it, [he said] because there was the little book, Wiley's "History of the Waldenses" right there on the Review and Herald book counter, and here was the "The Great Controversy" coming out with extracts from it that were scarcely disguised, some of them.

Kellogg's testimony is that he sent for William C. White and asked for an explanation. We must doubt that Kellogg remembered the exact words, for twenty-three years had passed, but the gist of the conversation is probably accurate and important enough to warrant being quoted in full.

He [W. C. White] said, "Don't you think that when Mother sees things that agree with what she has seen in vision, that it is all right for her to adopt it." I said, "No, not without giving credit for it. It may be all right for her to quote it and make use of it, but she ought to put quotation marks on [it:] and tell where she got it and should say this was in harmony with what she had 'seen!' She had no right to incorporate it with what she had 'seen' and make

it appear that she has seen it first of all. The preface says this book has been written by special illumination, that she has gotten new light by special inspiration; so people read things here, read those paragraphs, and they say, 'Here I saw that in Wiley's book.' " And I said to Will, "That will condemn your book, detract from the book and the character of it, and it never will do; it is wrong." I said, "I simply won't stand for it, and I want you to know that I won't, and that this thing ought to stop." Now, then, they went on and sold that whole edition, at least 1500 copies. . . .

They went right on selling it, but they changed the preface in the next edition [1888] so as to give a little bit of the loophole to crawl out of, giving a little bit of a hint in it, in a very mild and rather in a hidden way that the author had also profited by information obtained from various sources as well as from divine inspiration. That is my recollection. I remember I saw the correction and I didn't like it. I said, "That is only a crawl out, that is simply something put in so that the ordinary reader won't discover it at all but will see the larger statements there of special inspiration; so they will be fooled by that thing."<sup>127</sup>

The statement in the Introduction to the 1888 *The Great Controversy* that Kellogg called "a crawl out" is actually quite significant. It opened the door for a turning point in the church's understanding of White's inspiration:

The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay. This history I have presented briefly, in accordance with the scope of the book, and the brevity which must necessarily be observed, the facts having been condensed into as little space as seemed consistent with a proper understanding of their application. In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject.<sup>128</sup>

This was something new. White was acknowledging that she relied on human sources, in this case historians, while asserting that she did not think it necessary to cite them, because they provided information that was already well known. But wait. Just a few paragraphs above she had said, "Through the illumination of the

Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages." And "As the Spirit of God has opened to my mind the great truths of His word, and the scenes of the past and the future, I have been bidden to make known to others that which has thus been revealed."<sup>129</sup> Which was it? Was her history based on visions or on the work of historians?

W. C. White had the answer. It was both. As he asked Kellogg, "Don't you think that when Mother sees things that agree with what she has seen in vision, that it is all right for her to adopt it?" Here, at last, was an explanation for the similarities between White and other authors. Kellogg was correct, however, no one seemed to notice the statement. It was too ambiguous, perhaps by design. Not surprisingly, the issue of sources did not go away. In the late 1880s D. M. Canright accused White of plagiarism,<sup>130</sup> and in 1906-1907 some of the doctors in Battle Creek, notably Charles E. Stewart, William S. Sadler, and Kellogg did the same. White's "crawl out" statement, as Kellogg called it, was clearly not sufficient.

Ellen White's acknowledgment that she took words from others was new. But what became the new orthodoxy was W. C. White's explanation that these words simply described what she had already seen in vision. This was believable, because until the 1970s Adventists, except for Ellen White's inner circle, did not realize how much had been taken. In his defense of White in 1945, F. D. Nichol assured his readers that only 12 percent of *The Great Controversy* was quoted material and that two-thirds of this was from primary sources. In short, only 4 percent of *The Great Controversy* was taken from historians.<sup>131</sup> Nichol apparently was not aware that close paraphrases were not cited and that the cited primary sources were simply the ones cited by the historians White was following. If she had also cited close paraphrases, the majority of paragraphs in *The Great Controversy* would have required a footnote.

How much more accurate it would have been in 1888 had White, with W. C. White, Marian Davis, and others who may have been advising her at the time, simply and clearly acknowledged that she was indebted to Protestant historians and followed them closely, because their history helped her tell the great controversy story. A statement like this in 1888 would have removed most of the controversy over sources and errors that have troubled Adventists to this day.

## 1911—INERRANCY

The inerrancy of *The Great Controversy* became an issue in 1911 when a new edition was needed due to worn out printing plates. Given a new edition, Ellen White desired that everything in the book should be "closely examined to see if the truths it contained were stated in the very best manner."<sup>132</sup> White's wish that the book be as perfect as possible led W. C. White, who managed the process, to seek suggestions

for revisions from Publishing Department personnel, members of the book committees at the publishing houses, and state canvassing agents.

Close examination started with proofreading (grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation) and checking to confirm that all quotations were accurate and properly cited.<sup>133</sup> From the suggestions that began to pour in, it was soon apparent that quite a few words or phrases needed to be changed—some to avoid offending Catholic readers, others for historical accuracy.<sup>134</sup> The most significant suggestions came from W. W. Prescott, one of the church's preeminent leaders and an excellent scholar.<sup>135</sup>

Prescott, in a thirty-nine page document, recommended over a hundred corrections. He said it was quite a shock “to find in this book so many loose and inaccurate statements.”<sup>136</sup> Most of the extensive research by White's staff and others<sup>137</sup> to correct errors and most of the changes that were eventually made in *The Great Controversy* were in response to Prescott's critique.

In *Visions and Revisions* Graybill summarizes the changes that were approved by White. There were fifty-three, he says, that “affected the sense of the passage in which they were found. Sometimes these were fine points, adding a ‘nearly’ or omitting an ‘all’ from a sentence.” The effect of most of these changes was to change absolute statements into qualified terms.<sup>138</sup> The chapter on the French Revolution was the most problematic. It included quite a few misleading statements, because White's source for this chapter, Sir Walter Scott, was not a competent historian, but primarily a writer of historical fiction. His work had passed through Uriah Smith's *Daniel and Revelation* to the pages of the 1888 *The Great Controversy*.<sup>139</sup>

The ability of the editors to change meaning in hardly noticeable ways is notable. They were certainly under pressure to do so, for concerned Pacific Press workers spread rumors of “very serious alterations.” S. N. Haskell cited this in a letter to W. C. White, adding, “You will see there are others besides me who do not believe in re-editing your mother's writings.”<sup>140</sup> And of course there was also the author herself to please. Ultimately, she approved all the changes, and in July 1911 the new edition of *The Great Controversy*, the one we still read, came off the press. This turn was subtle and eventually forgotten, for even today there are those who insist that there are no historical errors in *The Great Controversy*.

White valued the quality and credibility of her books, and if turns were necessary to protect her reputation as a writer, she turned. In 1883, she allowed her words to be changed, but not their meaning. In 1888, she acknowledged that she used the words of historians to describe historical events, even as she affirmed that she saw scenes of the past in visions. Finally in 1911, by approving word changes that were made specifically because they changed meaning, she acknowledged implicitly that her historical writings were not error free. Bit by bit, when

faced with necessity, White turned, but only as much as she had to. And she never educated the church about how her books were written or rebuked publicly, or (as far as we know) privately, those who claimed more for her than she knew to be true.

For Adventists today, struggling to harmonize her claims of inspiration and originality with the magnitude of her indebtedness to other writers and the inevitable errors she picked up from them, the question that cries out for an answer is, "Why?" Why did White not just openly and unequivocally share with everyone what those who worked closely with her knew? Marian Davis re-wrote much of *The Great Controversy* and came close to being a co-author for other books. Prescott helped her shape many of her writings and corrected errors before publication. H. Camden Lacey helped make corrections in the 1911 *The Great Controversy*. They knew, with some church leaders and other members of her professional family, how her books were written, yet they remained devoted to Ellen White and believed that she was God's messenger. Even J. H. Kellogg, in the heat of the 1906 schism, believed that White was "a woman God had inspired and led," that problems with her writings were only flaws, "that the main effort and tenor or her life had been wonderfully good and helpful, that she had stood for principles that were straight and right, and that her work had been a good work."<sup>141</sup>

Perhaps we will never be able to know why White was not more forthcoming about her writings. Some Adventists, then and now, see nothing more than a "White lie." My preferred explanation, and one I think credible given her life's work, is that in mid-nineteenth-century America, when many people were open to visionaries, inspiration was narrowly defined. One was either totally original and inerrant or one was not inspired. Perhaps, because White believed her gift was needed by the church, she feared that candor would discourage belief and give ammunition to her critics. A letter she wrote on February 6, 1894 to Fannie Bolton, one of her literary assistants, lends credence to this explanation. Responding to Fannie's concern over her extensive reliance on other authors, Ellen said,

Should I attempt to vindicate my course to those who do not appreciate the spiritual character of the work which is laid upon me, it would only expose myself and the work to misconception and misrepresentation. To present the matter before other minds would be useless, for there are but few who are really so connected with God [who] see beneath the surface appearance as to understand it. This work is one that I cannot explain.<sup>142</sup>

Whatever the reason for the coverup, White herself cannot escape some responsibility for the Ellen White problem that still troubles the church.<sup>143</sup>

## THE BIBLE CONFERENCE—1919

The significance of the 1919 Bible Conference is not because there was new evidence challenging White's originality or authority. For several decades church leaders had become ever more aware that White depended heavily on sources and literary assistants to produce her books, and that her writings contained errors. What was new was the willingness of General Conference president A. G. Daniells and a handful of other church leaders to share this knowledge with editors and Bible and history teachers. What also was new was that White was not present to authorize another turn.

A turn was needed, because White's authority was being dragged into disagreements over such matters as the meaning of "the daily" in Daniel 8, and there was still a lot of back and forth on the nature and use of her writings following the revisions in the 1911 *The Great Controversy*. Prescott had expressed his concern about these issues in a confidential 1915 letter to W. C. White:

It seems to me that a large responsibility rests upon those of us who know that there are serious errors in our authorized books and yet make no special effort to correct them. The people and our average ministers trust us to furnish them with reliable statements, and they use our books as sufficient authority in their sermons; but we let them go on year after year asserting things which we know to be untrue. I cannot feel that this is right. It seems to me that we are betraying our trust and deceiving the ministers and people. It appears to me that there is much more anxiety to prevent a possible shock to some trustful people than to correct error. . . .

The way your mother's writings have been handled and the false impression concerning them which is still fostered among the people have brought great perplexity and trial to me. It seems to me that what amounts to deception, though probably not intentional, has been practiced in making some of her books, and that no serious effort has been made to disabuse the minds of the people of what was known to be their wrong view concerning her writings. But it is no use to go into these matters. I have talked with you for years about them, but it brings no change. I think however that we are drifting toward a crisis which will come sooner or later and perhaps sooner. A very strong feeling of reaction has already set in.<sup>144</sup>

The Bible and History Teacher's Conference was an opportunity to clarify theological issues and share with thought leaders an honest understanding of White's spiritual gift.<sup>145</sup> It convened on July 1 on the campus of Washington Missionary College and concluded on July 19. The meetings started at 9:00 A.M. with

worship and continued from 10:00 o'clock until noon with presentations. The afternoons were for discussion, and in the evening the Bible and history teachers met in a Teachers Council. The Teachers Council continued on until August 9. In all, there were 65 in attendance—29 educators, 11 editors, and 25 administrators and support staff. Conspicuous by his absence was W. C. White, kept in California by a family wedding. How one wishes we had his comments in the transcripts of the discussions.

Daniells, the driving force for the conference, dominated it from beginning to end. He opened it with a powerful address, assuring those who feared the conference would spark controversy that the purpose was not to magnify differences but rather to identify "the great essentials, the fundamentals."<sup>146</sup> He also presented the morning worship talks, chaired most of the meetings, and was always present when controversial issues were discussed. He did not, however, attempt to limit discussion. All viewpoints were welcome and respected.

Our interest in the conference is in the presentations and discussions about White's writings, but there were other issues. Much time was spent on prophetic interpretations—the identity of the ten kingdoms, the 1,260 day/year prophecy, the seven trumpets, the "daily," and the king of the north.<sup>147</sup> Considerable time was also given to the Trinity. Of course, White's name came up in these conversations, but the major discussions regarding her occurred on July 10 and 16 during the Bible Conference and again on July 30 and August 1 after the conclusion of the Bible Conference when only the Bible and history teachers were still present.<sup>148</sup>

The core issue was the authority of White's writings. No one questioned her inspiration. It was frequently affirmed. But those with knowledge of how her books were written believed it important that teachers not use her writings as authoritative on the facts of history or on the interpretation of biblical texts. Not only was it not honest to do so, they said, it would discredit the church to claim as truth that which could be demonstrated as false. Furthermore, White had already insisted that her writings not be used to settle disputes on biblical interpretation, and she had agreed that her history could be corrected when found to be inaccurate.

The most outspoken advocates of this view were A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, J. N. Anderson, and H. Camden Lacey. Space does not permit extensive quotations from these discussions, but there are two essential quotations that answer the question that prompted the gathering of Ellen White scholars at Angwin on October 19-22, 2023 and led to this book. First, given what we know today about how White's books were written and recognizing their limited value for answering questions about science, history, or biblical exegesis, what is their value? Second, What, for us, confirms her spiritual gift? First, Daniells:

That gift [White's inspiration] was exercised steadily and powerfully in the development of this movement. The two were inseparably connected, and there was instruction given regarding this movement in all its phases through this gift, clear through for seventy years.

Second, H. Camden Lacey:

In our estimate of the spirit of prophecy, isn't its value to us more in the spiritual light it throws into our own hearts and lives than in the intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters? Ought we not to take those writings as the voice of the Spirit of [in?] our hearts, instead of as the voice of the teacher to our heads? And isn't the final proof of the spirit of prophecy its spiritual value rather than its historical accuracy?<sup>149</sup>

As interesting as the conclusions reached by Daniells, Prescott, and others regarding White's originality and authority was the response of the Bible and history teachers. They did not dispute the facts; their concern was the reaction they would get from students and the field. I am quoting only a few of the many statements:

**W. E. Howell:** I think the teachers here at [are?] all satisfied as to the place that is to be given to the spirit of prophecy in its relation to their work. But these teachers, when they get back to their places of work, will have all kinds of questions put to them. . . . I think there is where the difficulty is going to be.

If there is anything that can be done by way of putting something in the hands of the teachers so that they could give the true representation of the matter, I think it would be a very great help.<sup>150</sup>

**W. G. Wirth:** Really, that is my biggest problem. I shall certainly be discredited if I go back and give this view. I would like to see some published statement given out by those who lead this work so that if that thing should come up there would be some authority back of it, because I am in for a lot of trouble on that thing. I would like to see something done, because that education is going right on, and our students are being sent out with the idea that the *Testimonies* are verbally inspired, and woe be to the man out where I am that does not line up to that.<sup>151</sup>

**C. L. Benson:** I do not think it is fair for us to go out and try to state the position of our General Conference men. On the other hand, I know the feelings and doctrine as taught in our conferences, and they are the Bible teachers

of the people; and if our Bible and history teachers take these liberal positions on the spirit of prophecy, our schools are going to be at variance with the field.<sup>152</sup>

**W. H. Wakeham:** "They [church members] have accepted the *Testimonies* all over the country, and believe that every identical word that Sister White has written was to be received as infallible truth. We have that thing to meet when we get back, and it will be brought up on our classes just as sure as we stand here, because it has come to me over and over again in every class I have taught. It not only comes out in classes, but in churches. I know we have a very delicate task before us if we meet the situation and do it in the way the Lord wants it done. I am praying very earnestly for help as I go back to meet some of the things I know I am going to meet."<sup>153</sup>

**G. B. Thompson:** I think we are in this fix because of a wrong education that our people have had [voice: that is true.] If we had always taught the truth on this question, we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the *Testimonies* on a plane where she says they do not stand. We have claimed more for them than she did.<sup>154</sup>

**A. G. Daniells:** I do not believe it is necessary to dissemble a bit, but I do believe, brethren, that we have got to use the wisdom that God alone can give us in dealing with this until matters gradually work over. We have made a wonderful change in nineteen years. Brother Prescott. Fifteen years ago we could not have talked what we are talking here today. It would not have been safe.<sup>155</sup>

As it turned out it was not safe in 1919. Daniells had arranged for a stenographic record from which transcripts were prepared, and as the end of the conference approached some began to question how these transcripts would be used. There were good arguments for and against publication, but Daniells had the final say. He decided to lock them up in the church archives. And there they stayed, hidden for half a century. The discovery and publication of portions of the conference transcripts in *Spectrum* in 1979 is part of the 1970s story, but before jumping forward fifty years to the next turning point, we need to understand the significance and consequences of the 1919 Bible Conference.

What was the core issue? It was not verbal inspiration vs. thought inspiration, even though participants referred continually to verbal inspiration as the prevailing view of church members. The issue of verbal inspiration had been settled in 1883.

White's words were her own. They could be changed. But meaning could not! As all writers know, since it is difficult to change words without changing meaning, few of White's words could actually be changed. And once a document was presented in proper English, why would one want to change the words unless one wanted to change the meaning? If meaning is inspired, then the distinction between verbal inspiration and thought inspiration is a moot point. What church members had been taught, and what most believed, was that the exact meaning of Ellen White's words came directly from the Holy Spirit.

This is precisely what Daniells, Prescott, and others were challenging. They knew the facts from experience. Daniells' eyes were opened when he was in Australia. "I saw *The Desire of Ages* being made up, and I saw the rewriting of chapters, some of them written over and over and over again. I saw that, and when I talked with Sister Davis about it, I tell you I had to square up to this thing and begin to settle things about the spirit of prophecy."<sup>156</sup>

Prescott reported that W. C. White "told me frankly that when they got out *Great Controversy*, if they did not find in her writings anything on certain chapters to make the historical connections, they took other books, like *Daniel and the Revelation*, and used portions of them; and sometimes her secretaries and sometimes she herself, would prepare a chapter that would fill the gap."<sup>157</sup> It was not surprising to Daniells and Prescott that books filled with close paraphrases from other authors and produced by a team contained errors.

Inerrancy was the issue at the 1919 Bible Conference. With her approval of the edits for the 1911 *The Great Controversy*, White had already conceded that her history was not always accurate. For at least fifteen years church leaders understood how Ellen White's books were written. Yet upon reflection they had determined that these facts were consistent with her spiritual gift. It was time to share this knowledge with the church.

The 1919 Bible Conference was a good start. A significant turn was in the offing, but there was no turn. Daniells lost his nerve. What was needed was more than a release of the transcripts and some pamphlets. Even sermons and articles would have been inadequate. What church members needed to see was evidence. Could Daniells and church leaders have pulled it off in 1919? Probably not. They did not have the hard evidence we have today. All they had was their personal knowledge and the historical errors scattered about in *The Great Controversy*. So Daniells decided to put the transcripts in a vault and let the matter lie. It was a failure of leadership, but an understandable one.

As it was, reports of the conversations were leaked. People were quoted. Critics spread the word that Daniells and others doubted the spirit of prophecy. And not surprisingly, the reaction the Bible and history teachers feared happened anyway.

Daniells failed to be re-elected president at the 1922 General Conference session, several of the college teachers who participated in the Bible Conference were forced out of denominational employment, and whatever else others thought, they kept it to themselves.<sup>158</sup> In the decades that followed, as Adventism drifted toward Fundamentalism, White's authority on all matters remained unchallenged.<sup>159</sup>

### THE 1970S—SHIFTING VIEWS OF INSPIRATION

The days of my youth, as I attended Adventist schools from first grade through Columbia Union College (1959-1963) in Takoma Park, Maryland, were golden years for the Adventist Church and for Ellen White. George Knight, who shared these years (at Pacific Union College), calls this period the "Wonderful World of Ellen White." All the big issues seemed settled. Adventists had the truth. Any question one might raise was settled with a quotation from White. The facts about her humanity and her writings were buried in archives.

Then came the 1960s. America was changing. So was Adventism. The Ellen White scholarship of the 1970s would have come sooner or later. Questions about her authority were popping up all over North America. It came sooner, because church leaders decided they needed a university for training ministers, teachers, and professional staff for Adventist institutions. In 1960 the General Conference, by moving Potomac University, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington, D. C., to Berrien Springs, Michigan and merging it with Emmanuel Missionary College, established Andrews University.

Richard Hammill, Andrews University's second president (1963-1976), set out to build an academic powerhouse, and he succeeded.<sup>160</sup> The EMC faculty was strong. The seminary faculty even stronger. And as the years passed, dozens of young PhDs, many of them from America's most prestigious universities, joined them. Andrews University also attracted many of Adventism's brightest students. I had the good fortune to join this faculty in 1967. It was an intellectual hothouse.

What brought us together was our Adventism, and the study of Adventism became our passion. What was our mission? How should we relate to the explosion of knowledge in almost every academic discipline and the rapidly changing world? How had our Adventist past shaped our beliefs and behavior? Many faculty members and students saw the need for change. But standing in the way of almost every fresh suggestion was an Ellen White quote. Inevitably the study of White became a priority.

The flood of revisionist Ellen White scholarship in the 1970s began with the publication of the Autumn 1970 issue of *Spectrum*, the journal of the newly formed Association of Adventist Forums.<sup>161</sup> The issue contained articles on White by Roy Branson and Herald Weiss, Frederick Harder, William Peterson, and

Richard Lewis. The two that stimulated the most interest were the ones by Branson and Weiss, young assistant professors in the seminary, and Peterson, a young associate professor in the English department of Andrews University. Branson and Weiss said it was an essential and immediate task for the church to establish “more objective ways of understanding what Ellen White said.” Specifically, they called on Adventist scholars to “discover the nature of Mrs. White’s relationship to other authors” and “recover the social and intellectual milieu in which she lived and wrote.”<sup>162</sup>

Peterson simply examined the historians quoted in the chapter in *The Great Controversy* on the French Revolution and concluded that all were anti-Catholic, anti-democratic, strong on moral fervor, and weak on factual evidence. He also concluded that White used these sources carelessly, sometimes simply misreading them, at times exaggerating them, and occasionally leaving out crucial facts, thereby distorting the significance of events.<sup>163</sup> The Peterson article stimulated a critical response from the White Estate that Peterson easily rebutted. One might say that the Branson/Weiss and Peterson articles launched the Ellen White research of the 1970s. Within several years all three had left denominational employment.

There were other revisionist Ellen White scholars in the 1970s, Ronald Graybill, Gary Land, and Jonathan Butler being three of the more important,<sup>164</sup> but the two most consequential were Ronald Numbers and Walter Rea. Numbers, a history department colleague at Andrews University for one year (1969-1970), wrote *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* during his four years at Loma Linda University (1970-1974), where he had been hired to teach the history of medicine and science to medical students. The book was published in 1976,<sup>165</sup> by which time Numbers was an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin. For him, like other Ellen White scholars, Adventist employment was no longer an option. Number’s basic thesis was that White derived her health reform ideas from contemporary health reformers such as James C. Jackson, William Alcott, Sylvester Graham, Dio Lewis, L. B. Coles, and others while asserting that she based her health message on visions. In addition, Numbers showed her claiming divine revelation for changing views and scientifically invalid statements.

The inevitable controversy broke out even before the book was published. As a courtesy to the White Estate, Numbers had provided the staff with a typescript before sending the final draft to the publisher. Their response was to undermine the book in every way they could. Ron’s scholarship, however, was too thorough to refute. Meanwhile, discussion swept through Adventist intellectual circles as a result of clandestinely circulated typescripts of the first draft. Then, in its August 2, 1976 issue, *Time* magazine featured Ron’s book. The controversy rocked the church. Many

read the book. Many more followed the controversy. And by word of mouth the influence spread and may still be spreading. The publication of *Prophetess of Health* was a seminal event in the history of Adventism.

Before recounting the contributions of Walter Rea, the work of one other historian—work that remained almost unnoticed by most church members—must be mentioned. It provided irrefutable evidence that White's sources for *The Great Controversy* were historians, not visions. The evidence was White's "Huss Manuscript." The researcher was me. My paper, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians," was presented to the White Estate in March of 1974. It lined up, in three columns, White's handwritten draft pages on John Huss with the Huss chapters in James A. Wylie's *History of Protestantism* and the Huss section in the 1888 *The Great Controversy*. This three-column comparison proved that White had closely paraphrased Wylie's narrative and then given her literary assistant, Marian Davis, the freedom to edit, delete, and add additional history from Wylie as she saw fit. The evidence, as I summarized it, was that "Ellen White was not just borrowing paragraphs here and there that she ran across in her reading, but in fact following the historians page after page, leaving out much material but using their sequence, some of their ideas, and often their words."<sup>166</sup>

I did not publish or circulate this paper, because in order to obtain access to the "Huss Manuscript" I had to give my word to Arthur White, secretary of the White Estate, that I would not. Nevertheless, one of the few trusted colleagues at Andrews University, whom (with Arthur White's permission) I had asked to critique my work, leaked it. Copies circulated widely among Adventist academics. Meanwhile, I was negotiating with Arthur White on possible revisions to my paper. He had promised an official response from the White Estate, but first wanted me to soften language here and there. It was not until 1977 that these negotiations came to an end and I produced a revised edition.<sup>167</sup>

During these negotiations, Arthur White and church leaders already knew of the transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference. Don Yost, the archivist of the newly established General Conference Archives, had discovered the complete 2,400 type-written pages of the stenographic record in 1974. Anxiety spread as church leaders became aware of their contents. They were not to be shared, not even mentioned. Church leaders determined that only select scholars could have limited access. During our three years of negotiations, although these transcripts were relevant to my work, Arthur White never mentioned them.

Then in 1979, almost overnight, everyone was talking about the 1919 Bible Conference. Molleurus Couperus, the founding editor of *Spectrum*, learning of the transcripts, obtained access to them, and not having signed a non-disclosure document took the liberty of making copies. Long excerpts appeared in *Spectrum* in

May.<sup>168</sup> *Spectrum* readers were stunned to learn that church leaders who had worked closely with White knew much of what the historians of the 1970s were just now discovering, and they were angered that for fifty years the transcripts had been buried and even now were being kept under wraps. The publication of these transcripts was, perhaps, the most significant Ellen White discovery of the decade.

Ron Numbers' book, revisionist Ellen White articles in *Spectrum*, my paper still circulating privately, and now the transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference—coverup was no longer an option for church leaders. And they could no longer ignore Walter Rea, a Southern California pastor who had uncovered massive Ellen White dependence on sources. Since 1977, he had been sending examples of parallel comparisons to Robert Olson at the White Estate and General Conference president, Neal Wilson—both former classmates of his at PUC.<sup>169</sup> Given the magnitude of the evidence he had uncovered and the certainty that sooner or later he would go public, church leaders realized they had to give him a hearing. A committee of nineteen was appointed to examine his evidence. I had the good fortune to be one of them.<sup>170</sup>

We met at the Glendale Adventist Hospital, January 28 and 29, 1980. G. Ralph Thompson, secretary of the General Conference, was chairman, and Robert Olson, secretary. Church leaders and scholars made up the rest of the committee. Tables were arranged in a hollow square, with Rea and his stack of books at the front. In addition to the minutes, three tapes were made—one for Wilson, one for the White Estate, and one for Rea, with no copies allowed.

An excerpt from my journal outlines the two days and captures my euphoria over what seemed might be the dawn of a new age:

We spent the first day listening to Rea's presentation. We interrupted only to ask questions for clarification. Rea showed himself to be a terrible scholar, a poor and confusing speaker, and a bitter Adventist with a chip on his shoulder. He evaded questions, jumped from one point to another, and never laid out a clear picture of his evidence. It was like being given unarranged note cards to read. Also, he basically conveyed the attitude of a disbeliever who looked on EGW as a clever fraud.

But I was so impressed with the committee. No one used these excuses to turn away from the evidence. Every one present was a person of real integrity. We all acknowledged that Rea had the facts. EGW had borrowed far more than any of us had realized. What I found for *Great Controversy* carries over in principle to just about everything that she wrote! In some books there are half a dozen sources per chapter, but all is clearly paraphrased. The borrowing goes all through the "Conflict of the Ages" series,

including *Desire of Ages*, the *Testimonies* and into devotional books. All of these non or extra Biblical accounts in *Desire of Ages* of Christ's activities, thoughts, etc. come from others. Copied from others are some of her most famous and frequently quoted passages.

On the second morning, Jan. 29, we debated the evidence with Rea and then in the afternoon made long speeches to each other, allowing him to listen but not take part. We all accepted the evidence. Most told their personal story of when they first discovered EGW "borrowed" and how they came to terms with this in their own lives. All agreed that this borrowing was consistent with inspiration and pointed to the similar pattern of borrowing by Bible writers. But while we asserted that Rea's material was not alarming to us, we acknowledged it would be alarming to the church. So we urged PREXAD to begin an immediate and extensive program of education for the church. To my surprise Olson & Lesher took the lead in this discussion. We went out knowing that we had made history and that the church would never be the same. No doubt this is just beginning of many meetings I will attend on this topic.<sup>171</sup>

The Rea Committee had called for an open and honest response to the Ellen White research of the 1970s. Would church leaders risk an immediate and extensive program of education to inform church members about Ellen White's close and extensive paraphrasing the work of others? It almost happened. In February, General Conference president, Neal Wilson, called a special meeting of the General Conference Committee to hear a report on the Rea Committee.<sup>172</sup> G. Ralph Thompson, Robert Olson, Fred Harder, Richard Lesher, William Johnson, and Herbert Douglas, all members of the Rea committee, shared their views. They were as candid and open with the General Conference Committee as they had been at Glendale. After much discussion and drafting, the committee voted six recommendations. The most important were numbers 2, 3, and 4. They recommended:

- 2) That, as soon as possible, a plan be developed for thoroughly informing our church administrators concerning the nature and extent of Ellen White's use of sources;
- 3) That immediate study be given to a plan for educating the church in easily grasped steps on the subject of inspiration and Ellen White's use of sources. Some means of accomplishing this could be inspiration seminars, articles in the *Adventist Review* and the *Ministry* magazine, and through the Sabbath School lessons;

4) That an in-depth study on the writing of *The Desire of Ages* be implemented, and that some suitable person, working under the supervision of a broad-based committee, be asked to foster the project. This detailed study should attempt to discover not only the similarities between Ellen White and other authors, but also the dissimilarities and the unique, positive contributions to be found in her works;

Almost immediately President Wilson began the re-education of the church. In a March 20 article in the *Review*, "This I Believe About Ellen G. White," he informed the church about the Rea committee, acknowledged that "in her writing Ellen White used sources more extensively than we have heretofore been aware of or recognized," and stated in five points what to some Adventists may have seemed a turn: "originality is not a test of inspiration;" "God inspires people, not words;" "the Holy Spirit helps the messenger to select his material carefully;" "the prophet's use of existing materials does not necessarily mean that the prophet is dependent upon these sources;" and "whenever we recognize similarities we must also see the dissimilarities."<sup>173</sup>

At the time, even though Wilson somewhat dodged the evidence, I was overjoyed with these words. Use of existing materials does not necessarily prove dependence, but in most of White's books it did. It was not only White who was selecting sources and choosing words to copy, her literary assistants were doing it, too. And White's creative use of sources proved nothing, for creativity is a human trait. And yet Wilson's statement was a courageous start; conceding Ellen White's lack of originality was significant.

Recommendation 4 of the General Conference Committee was also implemented almost immediately. The "Life of Christ Project" was ready to be officially launched on July 1. Its purpose was to discover the extent to which *The Desire of Ages* was dependent on sources.<sup>174</sup> An oversight committee was appointed, an adequate budget provided, and a team of scholars assembled. Fred Veltman, a Pacific Union College professor of religion with impeccable academic credentials was appointed lead investigator.

The church had reached a turning point, and it seemed to be turning. What would follow, I hoped, would be a comprehensive implantation of recommendations 2 and 3: an immediate and extensive program of education for the church; a series of cascading conferences for church administrators, editors, evangelists, pastors, and teachers at all levels; and articles in church publications, books for believers, and of course new textbooks at every level of Adventist education. With great care, step by step, at first just building on Wilson's five principles, then later the findings of the "Life of Christ Project" and continuing Ellen White research, Adventists

would reclaim their prophet. They would see the evidence of her humanity and her flaws, understand the limits of her authority, and yet cherish her spiritual gift, her wise counsel, and her devotional power.

None of this happened. Recommendations 2 and 3 seemed to be forgotten. There was no turn. What happened to stop this promising beginning? Perhaps it was the challenge of Desmond Ford. Ford, a professor at Pacific Union College, started a firestorm on October 27, 1979 with a presentation to the Angwin Adventist Forum that questioned the biblical exegesis supporting the Adventist belief in the investigative judgement. His conclusion was that the church's historic sanctuary doctrine could not be supported "directly or solely" by Scripture. Ford's presentation made an honest and open response to the White research of the 1970s even more challenging than it already was, for without Ellen White's authority where was the sanctuary? Arthur White considered Ford's views a direct attack on the authority and integrity of his grandmother.<sup>175</sup> At the same time that church leaders were wrestling with the Ellen White problem they were struggling with how to respond to Desmond Ford. The response was the Sanctuary Review Committee, a large group comprised of biblical scholars and church leaders, which met from August 10 to 15 in Glacier View, Colorado. The aftermath was Ford's dismissal from church employment.<sup>176</sup>

But even without Ford, there was much resistance to a turn. The evidence that Ellen White had extensively and closely paraphrased sources could not be denied, but there was great reluctance to acknowledge that she was dependent on these sources. If visions were not the primary source, how could one claim Ellen White's writings as authoritative? Less than two weeks after the Rea committee met, Harold Calkins, Southern California Conference president and a Rea Committee member, stated in the *Pacific Union Recorder* that "the committee did not discover dependence on other authors in the Spirit of Prophecy writings." And Robert Olson took the position in a letter on February 21 that "when we acknowledged that Ellen White had engaged in a certain amount of literary borrowing, we were not diminishing her authority as a prophet in the least."<sup>177</sup>

Acknowledging borrowing from sources while denying dependence on these sources was the explanation proffered by William C. White to John Harvey Kellogg in the 1880s—White may have copied and paraphrased from other others, but she was not dependent on them; she was just using their words to describe what she had already seen in vision. If White's borrowing was just here and there, as F. D. Nichol asserted in 1945, then this view was believable. But church leaders now knew the borrowing was everywhere. They were aware of the magnitude and sequence of the borrowing, the role of White's literary assistants, and the errors, both scientific and historical. And yet their response, however illogical, was a reaffirmation of White's authority.

Church leaders locked down this response in April 1980 at the General Conference session in Dallas by obtaining approval for a statement in the new Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, Number 18, affirming that Ellen White's writings were authoritative ("Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church."). There can be little doubt that, although work on a statement of fundamental beliefs had been underway for over a year, the wording in this statement was a response to the Ellen White scholarship of the 1970s.<sup>178</sup> And given that Ellen White's authority was now affirmed as a fundamental belief, and given that educating the church on how White's books were written would inevitably undermine this belief, it is not surprising that the initial willingness to turn slipped away.

Though Walter Rea's revelation in his book, *The White Lie*, was yet to rattle the church, by the end of 1980 the time for turning had passed. Nevertheless, Rea's book was a blow to White's originality. Unhappy with the response to the evidence he had presented at the January 1980 meeting in Glendale, Rea continued his work. He became a household name when the *Los Angeles Times* featured him in a front-page article on October 23, 1980 with the headline "Seventh-day Adventist Controversy: Plagiarism Found in Prophet Books." The article was syndicated in the Associated Press, reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and seen all over the world. It was an embarrassing moment for Adventism.

*The White Lie*, published in 1982, was more than an embarrassment, for though the scholarship was sloppy, the evidence was overwhelming. Rea provided almost an entire book of parallel columns showing beyond doubt that not only in her books, but also in articles, testimonies, letters, and even her diaries White copied other authors. The impact on the church, however, fell short of the impact of Ron Number's book and the publication of the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts. Ellen White news was becoming old news; Rea was not a recognized scholar; and in due time Fred Veltman's team would give the church the results of deep research. Why respond? Better to put Rea's work on the shelf and wait and see what Veltman would discover. Rea's book marked the end of what some church leaders called "attacks on Ellen White." But there were still two loose ends to tie up—the International Prophetic Guidance Workshop and the Veltman report.

The workshop was in response to Recommendation 6 of the February 1980 meeting of the General Conference Committee. That recommendation called for the Rea Committee or another similar committee to meet at some future date to evaluate the results of further research. The seventy appointees who attended the workshop, held April 11-15 at church headquarters, included the White Estate trustees and staff, the directors of the Ellen White research centers, spirit of prophecy coordinators from oversees divisions, college and university religion teachers,

editors, and General Conference leaders. The stated purpose was "to discuss current issues and other matters relating to the writings of Ellen G. White." Extensive documentation was provided, the fruits of several years of deep study by the White Estate and the Biblical Research Institute, and important papers were presented. All the issues were openly discussed. At the end, the participants recognized that most church members needed to be re-educated on Ellen White's spiritual gift and recommended the production of materials for this purpose.<sup>179</sup> There should have been follow-up materials and education, but there was nothing. Reportage was minimal, even discouraged, and most Adventists were not aware the workshop had ever happened.

One last note. In 1988 the Veltman Report finally appeared, a document of 2,561 pages. Veltman's conclusions that only 31.4 percent of *The Desire of Ages* was dependent to some extent on literary sources and that these sources were used creatively were championed by church leaders as positive outcomes.<sup>180</sup> Of course there was much more. In fact, Veltman's findings were consistent with the Ellen White research of the previous decade, and his summarizing conclusions would have ended his career if he had made them as a Seminary professor in the 1970s. In the years following, *Ministry* published several articles on the Veltman Report, all of good scholarship and all with a positive spin. That was it. Though Ellen White research continued, even accelerated, for the man or woman in the pew or the youth in an Adventist school, at least in North America, Ellen White began to fade away.

Looking back, what can we learn from the Ellen White scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s and the response of church leaders? First, church leaders of the 1970s and 1980s were presented with evidence that went well beyond the knowledge of church leaders in 1919. Daniells, Prescott, and others knew there was literary dependence, but they did not know it was so extensive. They knew there were historical errors in White's history and that her biblical exegesis was not the final word. But in 1919 they had little reason to doubt her statements on science. Yet, unlike the leaders of the 1970s and 1980s, they were willing to acknowledge that White's writings were not always based on visions and were not authoritative. The leaders in 1919 were under no pressure to turn. They saw the need to turn and wanted to turn. It was the membership that held them back.

The leaders of the 1970s and 1980s were under pressure to turn. Historians had uncovered abundant evidence that they recognized as valid. *Spectrum* and public media were spreading the news. Indeed, there was no widespread demand for change, but educated Adventists were increasingly open to a new understanding of Ellen White's gift. But there was no turn. It almost happened. Initial steps were taken. But the moment passed. The only turn was the acknowledgement by church leaders that White was not always original and that in her historical writing she

might have made some minor errors in unimportant minutiae, something that by her approval of the corrections made in the 1911 *The Great Controversy* Ellen had already acknowledged.<sup>181</sup>

## 2025—ANOTHER TURNING POINT?

We can identify three turning points during Ellen White's ministry, 1883, 1888, and 1911. Though she was never as forthcoming as we would like, on each of these occasions White recognized facts and turned, not much to be sure, but she turned. With a lot of hedging, she acknowledged that her words were not God's words, that she took material from others, and that she was not inerrant.

Twice since her death in 1915 church leaders have faced turning points—in 1919 and again in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1919 church leaders wanted to turn, but lacked the will to do so because they lacked evidence and faced a membership hostile to even the slightest turn. By the early 1980s church leaders had an abundance of evidence, scholars pushing for change, and numerous members open to a factual concept of inspiration, but there was no turn.

What will today's church leaders do? Another half-century has passed. Since 1980 historians have produced a mountain of new Ellen White scholarship, and with communication to millions requiring only a few keystrokes what Ellen White scholars know today and will continue to learn will, in time, be known by the world church. What then? Will White's authority in all matters still be non-negotiable? Or will church leaders be satisfied to say what H. Camden Lacey said in 1919: "In our estimate of the spirit of prophecy, isn't its value to us more in the spiritual light it throws into our own hearts and lives than in the intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters?"

The chapters in this book offer a way forward. Building on Lacy's powerful words, they show us an extraordinary woman, not the imaginary Ellen White of the 1950s, hailed as an inerrant authority on everything, but a flawed human like the rest of us. As a wife and mother, she struggled with hard times, sickness, and family challenges. She had some sharp edges. She also had a gift she had not asked for, the responsibility to bring God's message to a people who desperately needed it, but who did not always welcome it. In doing so, she became a powerful preacher, wise counselor, prolific writer, and the indispensable founder and shaper of Adventism. Her books, though they are dependent on sources and literary assistants, are clearly hers. They are the product of her vision, and they serve the purpose she intended. If we can recognize turning points when they arrive, these books can remain a treasure for Adventists, compelling in their wisdom and devotional power.

## CHAPTER NINE

# ELLEN WHITE FOR TODAY: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFFIRMATION

Ronald D. Graybill and Lawrence Geraty

### HISTORIC ADVENTIST AVERSION TO CREEDS

Early Adventists were adamantly opposed to church “creeds” and formal statements of beliefs. James White, one of the acknowledged founders of the movement, said,

I take the ground that creeds stand in direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point and the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too. But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed, then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over the place.

Ellen White, James’ wife and recognized recipient of “the gifts,” herself reiterated decades of opposition to creeds when she wrote in 1885, “The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; . . . Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.”

Ellen White’s good friend, John Loughborough, explained the fear of the movement’s leaders about adding anything to “the Bible alone.” “The first step of apostacy is to get up a creed, telling us what to believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth to commence persecution against such.”

Despite these anti-creedal convictions, Seventh-day Adventists eventually developed “statements of fundamental belief” that functioned for all practical purposes like a creed. The authors of these statements sought to distinguish, they said, between proscriptive tests and descriptive explanations, but today teachers and pastors may lose their jobs for deviating from a particular articulation of Adventist

belief, such as, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity. Saying “I believe” in Latin (*credo*) or in English amounts, in the end, to the same thing.

One might ask, “Is there a difference between a statement of belief and a creed?” A statement of belief could be defended when it serves to describe for others outside the community what the community generally believes. When such a statement is used to describe to believers within the community what they believe, or should believe, the same statement becomes a *de facto* creed in that it serves to define for the community what they believe.

Keeping in mind our traditional aversion to creedal tests, we think Adventists need to be clearer in what we affirm about the spiritual gifts of Ellen G. White. Our current Fundamental Belief 18 states:

The Gift of Prophecy. The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and we believe it was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Num. 12:6; 2 Chron. 20:20; Amos 3:7; Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; 2 Tim 3:16, 17; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10; 22:8, 9.)

With no intention of smoking out hidden heresy, what do we actually believe? In this chapter we seek a simpler, more precise statement of the Seventh-day Adventist belief about the gift of prophecy than the current one mentioned above, one more in harmony with the church’s historic statements on this subject. As this chapter will explain, such a statement could read:

The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. We believe this gift was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.

Given the stringent process through which proposed changes to statements of fundamental beliefs must now pass, it may be wishful thinking to hope that this statement will ever be officially adopted. Still, we think it expresses what most informed Adventists believe about Ellen White’s gift.

This chapter will now review the church’s historic expressions of its belief about the spiritual gift of prophecy and show how the current (2015) draft of Fundamental

Belief #18 on that subject could be revised as members of the church find “better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”

## ADVENTISTS AND CREEDS BEFORE 1980

In 1934 the General Conference issued a book titled, *Belief and Work of Seventh-day Adventists*. In the chapter on “What Seventh-day Adventists Believe,” the paragraph on “Spiritual Gifts” made no mention of Ellen White. It said only that the gifts were “given for the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, the edifying of the body of Christ.” But it did not even cite Ephesians 4:12, from which this statement borrowed. The 1934 book did not have a separate paragraph on the “Gift of Prophecy,” and in the entire book, Ellen White is mentioned only once, as one of the church’s “great leaders” who inspired “an appreciation of natural foods” in the diet.

As will be seen below, the official statements of Adventist beliefs in the 1931 and 1932 *Yearbooks*, published just before this pamphlet, were themselves very brief. The current 2015 statement of the church’s belief on the gift of prophecy is much more expansive and detailed than those historic statements. The wording is what a committee of church leaders recommended and what the delegates to the General Conference session in 2015 adopted.

General Conference president, Ted Wilson, in a 2022 Adventist News Network presentation, reviewed some of the history of statements on Adventist fundamental beliefs. Wilson called attention to one of the first formal statements of what Adventists believed—an 1872 pamphlet titled, “A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh Day Adventists.” Wilson made no mention of the fact that the authors of the pamphlet wanted it “distinctly understood” that the church had “no articles of faith, creed, or discipline aside from the Bible.” Furthermore, the statement of the “principles” listed were not “put forth as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them.” Had such a statement accompanied subsequent statements of fundamental beliefs, the church’s claim that these are not creeds would be more credible.

The twenty-five “principles” from the 1872 pamphlet were published again in the June 4, 1874 inaugural issue of the *Signs of the Times*. The 1872/1874 versions had a statement on spiritual gifts that did not mention Ellen White. The same statement on the gift of prophecy appeared in the 1889 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. In 1919, at a time when Adventists were identifying more and more with the Fundamentalist movement and anxious not to appear as a cult, two lists of fundamental beliefs made only very brief allusions to spiritual gifts. Then, in 1920 the list of Adventist beliefs that F. M. Wilcox included in the *Review* of April 1, 1920 did not mention the gift of prophecy at all. Lists of fundamental beliefs appeared again in the first *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* in 1931, and again in the 1932 *Yearbook*. These *Yearbook*

statements were briefer than the version in the 1874 pamphlet and again made no mention of Ellen White or how her gift might identify a remnant church. But these statements in the early 1930s were certainly more extensive than the ones in 1919. The 1932 statement said: "That God has placed in His church the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. That these gifts operate in harmony with the divine principles of the Bible, and are given for the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, the edifying of the body of Christ."

That is the way the church's fundamental belief on spiritual gifts remained until after 1950 when a paradigm shift occurred. The 1950 version of the belief on spiritual gifts was again the same as it had been in 1931 and 1932. But the 1951 version, while including everything in the 1950 version, without a break goes on to add, "That the gift of the Spirit of prophecy is one of the identifying marks of the remnant church." And now, finally, and for the first time in an official declaration, Ellen White was recognized by name in the words "this gift was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White."

That these changes should occur only as late as 1951 suggests that earlier statements of fundamental beliefs envisioned an audience outside the church, and thus omitted references to Ellen White that might have flagged the church as a "cult" in the eyes of the rest of the Christian world. Meanwhile, inside the church, even as early as the first *Church Manual*, issued in 1932, candidates for baptism were required to affirm that they believed that "the gift of the Spirit of prophecy" was "manifested in the remnant church through the ministry and writings of Mrs. E. G. White." So baptismal candidates were expected to believe these things long before they were listed among the "Fundamental Beliefs" of the church.

Also, the typewritten (but otherwise unpublished) minutes of the Annual Council in 1941 include a "Summary of Fundamental Beliefs," which asserted that "the presence of the gift of the Spirit of Prophecy is to be one of the identifying marks of the remnant church" and listed Ellen White's gift as a "manifestation" of that spiritual gift.

The 1951 version remained unchanged until the major revision of 1980. In the interim (1953-1957), Adventist scholars at the church's headquarters produced the *SDA Bible Commentary* under the editorship of Francis Nichol. According to Raymond Cottrell, in "The Untold Story of the Bible Commentary," one of Elder Nichol's basic requirements was that the commentary should at no point express any concept that could be construed as a contradiction of the writing of Ellen White. Thus, her views became canonical in practice.

## TRADITIONAL VIEWS CHALLENGED

A flurry of revisionist studies qualifying the authority of Ellen White and her writings began to be published during the 1970s. Roy Branson and Herold Weiss had written "Ellen G. White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," in *Spectrum* in 1970, and many

scholars and theologians soon took up the challenge. Even earlier, in 1965, Walter Rea had published an article on Ellen White's use of contemporary sources in *Claremont Dialogue*. Ronald L. Number's book, *Prophetess of Health*, appeared in 1976, emphasizing the secular sources of her health writings and unleashing an avalanche of rebuttals and defenses. Then, just six months before the 1980 General Conference session, Desmond Ford had challenged the church's sanctuary doctrine, and thus the authority of Ellen White, in his controversial Adventist Forum talk at Pacific Union College.

The entire process of revising the Fundamental Beliefs at the 1980 General Conference session in Dallas was described in detail by an involved delegate (Larry Geraty) in a *Spectrum* article, "A New Statement of Fundamental Beliefs," in July of that year. Not only did the session adopt a comprehensive restating of what Adventist believe in twenty-seven paragraphs, but also included an important preamble drafted by Ron Graybill:

Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.

This preamble allowed many delegates to vote for the final (1980) version of the twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs, even if they were not fully satisfied with all the wording. It was perhaps the greatest of all achievements in Dallas that the Adventist Church in General Conference session went on record to encourage the continuing pursuit of truth. In that 1980 version, the paragraph on "The Gift of Prophecy" read as follows:

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth and provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.

Key concepts included the belief that prophecy is a mark of the remnant church, that Ellen White exhibited this gift, and that her writings are a "continuing and authoritative source of truth." The challenge that the preamble added was for the church to continue to work toward a clearer understanding of Bible truth and to persist in the search for better language in which to express the Bible's teachings.

## FINAL STATEMENT REVISIONS

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the statement of twenty-seven fundamental beliefs in 1980, a twenty-eighth (“Growing in Christ”) was voted in 2005. The vote took place only after a careful three-step process was adopted: 1) Procedure for Suggesting Additions or Revisions to the Fundamental Beliefs; 2) Proposal for a New Fundamental Belief; and then 3) the Wording of the New Fundamental Belief itself. True, the 1980 actions affirm that the church’s fundamental beliefs can be modified and are not set in stone, but the process for doing so was forthwith to be more carefully guarded.

The 2015 version changed the 1980 phrase, “her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth,” to “her writings speak with prophetic authority.” One of the overseas divisions had had difficulty in translating the “authoritative source of truth” phrase without making it sound as if her authority was equal to that of the Bible. Removing the word, “truth,” from the statement and substituting the concept of “prophetic authority” seemed to solve the problem.

We have seen that not until 1951 was Ellen White’s name associated with our fundamental beliefs. But even as late as the 2015 General Conference discussion about our belief on the gift of prophecy, some delegates questioned the inclusion of her actual name in the belief, because her name is not included in the Bible. Still, with good reason there has been a growing recognition of her founding position in the church as well as her continuing guidance in taking us to the Bible for guidance in spiritual matters.

## WHITHER NOW?

In the light of renewed study of Ellen G. White in her historical context as well as her rightful and influential spiritual guidance of Seventh-day Adventists throughout their history, discussed in the earlier chapters of this book, the question, now, is: What would we now consider the most helpful way of restating Fundamental Belief No. 18?

Ideally, we suggest combining Fundamental Beliefs Nos. 17 (“Spiritual Gifts and Ministries”) and 18 (“The Gift of Prophecy”), but for the sake of simplicity we limit our recommendation to No. 18 alone:

God has placed in His church the gift of the Holy Spirit as enumerated in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. We believe that for Adventists the writings of Ellen G. White are among these—divinely inspired, Christ-centered, and Bible-based—providing comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. (1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-14).

However, should the desire be for minimal change, the following wording, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is recommended:

**Gift of Prophecy.** The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. We believe this gift was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Num. 12:6; 2 Chron. 20:20; Amos 3:7; Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 19:10).

Note that Revelation 12:17 and 22:8, 9 are not among the Scriptures cited, because they have nothing to do with Ellen White. The expression “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” is a reference to the message conveyed by Jesus in the spirit of the prophets and not some anciently anticipated slogan used by Seventh-day Adventists as a synonym for Ellen White and her ministry. Instead, it refers to the role of the author of Revelation, claimed as a fellow prophet. The other concept left out of the recommended statements is the concept of the remnant. While God has a “remnant,” it is not identical with any nameable group or organization of people. The remnant is observable by what it believes and does, not by its name. (This was recognized by the title Richard Schwarz gave to the denomination’s official history: *Light Bearers to the Remnant*, not, one notices, “of the Remnant.”)

Finally, the statement dispenses with the ambiguous idea that Ellen White “speaks with prophetic authority.” It is unclear what sort of “authority” this is. If it is, for some, an authority which overrules any interpretation of Scripture which differs from hers, then for them her writings do overrule the Bible’s authority. Since the statement will still say that her ministry provides “comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction” for the church, nothing more is needed. David Holland, in the *Oxford Handbook on Seventh-day Adventists*, sums it up well:

Ellen White’s visions and testimonies sought to guide Adventist reading of Scripture, providing clarity on such matters as where William Miller’s interpretations had gone wrong, how humans could improve their bodily health, and how to honor the Lord’s Sabbath. Over the course of her ministry her prophetic light would lead to her extraordinarily large oeuvre of inspired writing. The mere establishment of Ellen White’s prophetic ministry, however, did not resolve all the questions created by the presence of a new visionary. . . . Specifically, they needed to make sense of the relationship between the ancient canon and the living witness.

According to Adventist scholar Alberto R. Timm, as Holland notes, some segments of the church have “sought to reduce her work to mere ‘pastoral admonition’ and—on the other side—some have sought to afford her ‘canonical status.’ The mainstream of the church has sought a ground in between.”

Timm's choice may be too easy, however. "Pastoral admonitions" seldom amount to "mere" advice. Her comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction came with distinct power. Since 1915, Ellen White has been neither a living witness nor a plausible addition to the canon of Scripture—even for her most ardent admirers. Finding middle ground—a worthy goal—demands clearer thought on the abiding mission of the prophet, not simply splitting the difference between exaggerations.

In short, explaining what we believe about Ellen White in historically and biblically defensible language is essential to reclaiming Adventism's divine calling. We are not called to talk to ourselves, perfecting our statements of belief for internal consumption. Instead, we have a message to the wider world, both Christian and non-Christian. We must give an appealing and powerful affirmation of the blessed hope that animated Ellen White's work. As intimate participants in the creating of our current statements, the authors of this chapter urge our fellow believers to consider the "fuller understanding" and "better language" promised in 1980.

## FOR FURTHER READING

- Regarding creeds in Christianity, readers might profitably consult Jaroslav Pelikan's *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2003).
- Beginning with the 1872 statement, "A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists," Adventists have had much to say about creeds and fundamentals. See also D. E. Rebok, "The Spirit of Prophecy in the Remnant Church," *Our Firm Foundation*, Vol. 1 (1953); *Questions on Doctrine* (1957); N. C. Ted Wilson, "History of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs," Adventist News Network, January 6, 2022; Alberto Timm, "Issues on Ellen G. White and Her Role in the SDA Church," Adventist Digital Archive, 2002.
- Among many useful comments on creeds are the following articles in *Spectrum*: Herold Weiss, "Are Adventists Protestant?" (1972); Stanley G. Sturges, "Ellen White's Authority and the Church," (1972); Joseph J. Battistone, "Ellen White's Authority as Bible Commentator" (1977); William Wright, "Adventism's Historic Witness Against Creeds," (1977); Lawrence T. Geraty "A New Statement of Fundamental Beliefs," (1980). See also Edward Heppenstall, "The Inspired Witness of Ellen White," *Adventist Review*, May 7, 1987.
- Important recent scholarship on Adventist creedal statements includes David F. Holland, "The Phenomenon of Continuing Revelation in the Nineteenth Century," in the *Oxford Handbook of Seventh-day Adventism* (2024); Stefan Hoeschele, "Adventist Orthodoxy Codified: The Fundamental Beliefs of 1931," in *Spes Christiana* 32:2 (2021) and S. Joseph Kidder, "Creeds and Statements of Belief in Early Adventist Thought," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 47:1 (2009).
- Several forthcoming studies promise to be significant. In this "not-yet-published" category are Gilbert Valentine's "They Ought to Stand to Their Duty: Facing the Crisis Without a Living Prophet," (Friedensau University) and Warren Trenchard's "Prophecy and Ellen White in SDA Theology."

## AFTERWORD

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Niels-Erik Andreasen

From her first vision in 1844, Ellen G. White has been the object of both intense admiration and relentless criticism. But whatever her detractors have thought, by all accounts she did in fact become a remarkable woman—*influential, formidable, visionary, an inspired “messenger” (her preferred term), and a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.*

Now 181 years later a different situation has arisen. It has become too easy for many Adventists to let her slip quietly into the distant past of inattention or general neglect, due either to declining religious fervor or the simple passage of time. How is it possible to affirm a durable place for her in our Adventist history, and in the hearts and minds of church members, without being distracted either by noisy criticisms or by quiet neglect of her work? What positions, pathways, or “turning points” (to borrow a phrase from Don McAdams), can we take regarding her life and work to reclaim the vision for today?

The contributors to this volume have devoted a great deal of time and effort to the study of Ellen G. White’s life and contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their goal was not so much to set out her “theology”—what she believed and taught—as to understand better her contribution to the origin and growth of the church and its mission. They attempt to go behind the person of Ellen White, as it were, to understand her personality, including her call to preaching, writing, and counseling, and the way she helped shape the life of the church and its members. Above all, these writers have sought to describe her religious compass, her spiritual passion, and her communion with God.

It is fair to say that raising these questions has been unsettling to many church members, including leaders, because every discovery has raised new questions about her life and work and her influence upon the church. That is the nature of historical inquiry, especially when directed at a person who has long been accepted as a special spiritual messenger from God. But now these same contributors to our

understanding of “Sister White” wish to draw attention to the many benefits that also accrue from a clearer understanding of this remarkable individual. She was a woman in a man’s world, a mother and wife, a New Englander in temperament, a devout believer with little formal education, a counselor, an author, and preacher of note. She wrote profusely, offering spiritual guidance and personal counseling, commentary on the Bible, analysis of church history, and religious leadership.

Some believers will say that all of this is not helpful, because whatever she wrote, spoke, or did was under the direction of God and superintended by the Holy Spirit. There is no need for further inquiry. Yet, both her life and work are on detailed display for all to see in the White Estate and White centers around the world, in the archives holding original manuscripts, sources, correspondence, and her enormous literary production. She is the best-known Seventh-day Adventist of all time. Therefore, her life will be studied and her work analyzed, or alternatively, it will eventually be neglected. The chapters of this volume add to the many studies of the life and legacy of E. G. White, with the specific goal of reclaiming her legacy to our church. As we move into a future that she did not imagine, we must build on her spiritual insight.

This “Afterword” asks the question: “Where do we go from here?” It is not intended to provide a summary of previous chapters. Rather, it asks how we can move forward confidently while acknowledging new information about the prophet’s life and ministry discussed in previous chapters. It proposes three responses, or places, to stand.

First, we must accept the best evidence regarding the way Ellen White used sources and literary assistants in producing her books, even if this means we must reexamine our understanding of prophetic inspiration.

Second, we must draw a clear distinction between the “Spirit of Prophecy” and Scripture. Scripture is the only source of our faith and doctrine. Ellen White’s writings direct us to the Scriptures and offer insight, encouragement, and guidance to believers. Her role, in short, was not that of a theologian, but much more that of a pastor.

Finally, we must acknowledge that the messenger lived in an earlier period of our church, very different from our time, and that her guidance and counsel in her time must be adapted to the new circumstances in which we now live. Without careful interpretation, her legacy will be lost, and her achievements ignored by the future generations of church members.

One criticism of her work has to do with the way she wrote her books, especially those dealing with history, science, and Scripture. An example of that is her book, *The Great Controversy*. About this and similar books, she admitted, not surprisingly, that in order to acquire needed understanding of her subject matter she relied not only upon visionary experiences (“I was shown”) but also upon available history books from which she borrowed and quoted extensively. What she was shown

evidently came to her as thoughts, images, scenes, or insights. Those matters are subjective and generally not accessible to her readers. What she wrote using her own words was supplemented by what she borrowed from other authors or rewrote with the help of literary assistants. The ways she wrote books are public, and her readers can in many cases trace them back to her original manuscripts, check for literary dependency, historical accuracy, and ascertain her editorial decisions. We now know that her books did not emerge miraculously from her writing desk, but were prepared deliberately with the help of available information and the support of literary assistants. Her books were inspired through what she was shown (which the reader cannot check); they were written in her own words and borrowed words, with editorial help from literary assistants, much of which is open to the reader.

This general understanding of her literary work matches what she herself stated: Her thoughts came from God, but her words were her own. Therefore, the 1970s source and text analyses of, for example, *The Great Controversy* are here to stay, and they will continue to form the basis for understanding how this book (and others) took shape. These discoveries will not, and should not, go away. And we must never try to hide them from the reader, as though that were even possible. Indeed, one can now easily imagine what a bright student with a smart phone and AI software can rapidly discover regarding her historical and literary dependency. Therefore, what just a few decades ago brought consternation to many devoted readers of Ellen White, has now become generally understood: she used sources and borrowed from them in her own literary work. The idea is not that she was unable to write books on her own, but an acknowledgement that she could do a better job of it by being informed by individuals who knew more than she about the subjects she believed God wanted her to share. Apparently, she even relied upon others to help her locate some of this source material and articulate clearly how best to present it. Thus, she entrusted her messages to be conveyed partly through the work of others, using their writings, and borrowing their words as her own, knowing full well that in so doing she placed her messages from God in “vessels of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). That shows her confidence in her work, without pride, even as she acknowledged, perhaps at times reluctantly, her use of sources. She ought to be complimented on that, not criticized for it. Like all genuine messengers from God, as evidenced in both testaments of the Scriptures, she informed herself about what she wrote in her books and accepted help in producing them, perhaps even more readily than some of her fellow church members would like to acknowledge.

But beyond all that, the basic theme of *The Great Controversy* remains—namely that the Adventist Church is a branch on the tree of Christianity, planted 2,000 years ago originally in Jerusalem as a shoot from Judaism. It was strongly influenced by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Europe, and finally emerged out

of the nineteenth-century Millerite religious revival in North America. Thanks to this book, Adventists should never be ignorant about our origin, what our roots and branches are, and therefore what our responsibility in the world ought to be—witnessing to God's message of grace and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

My grandfather, a farmer by trade, is reputed to have said that one cannot read *The Great Controversy* without becoming a Seventh-day Adventist—but not for the historical details it contained. He was not a historian. But as a former Lutheran, he understood that the Adventist Church was grafted onto the tree of Christianity, after a partially failed European Reformation and a faltering American revival. It tells us about the responsibility we are called to take up. Therefore, before my grandfather died, he asked my father (his eldest child) to enroll in “our school” and become a “worker” in the church. And my father asked the same of me. I am quite certain my grandfather's confidence in E. G. White and *The Great Controversy* would not be shaken if he had been informed that in some (even many) parts, for example the historical chapters, she included information from books on the Reformation that subsequently were corrected and updated with the emergence of more historical details. The more God's messengers knew about the proclamation they were called to give, about the situation in which they gave it, and about the people to whom they were giving it, the clearer that proclamation would become. There is nothing untoward about a spiritual messenger like E. G. White or any biblical messenger who sought to become an informed observer of the circumstances surrounding their messages as these matters were understood at the time. On the contrary, E. G. White was just such a messenger, with thoughts from God in her mind and resources from the bookcase behind her writing desk. Perhaps she remembered that the ancient prophet Hosea once lamented, My people are destroyed, not by knowledge, but for lack of it (see Hosea 4:6).

A second criticism sometimes directed toward Ellen White has to do with the relative importance assigned to her writings and to the Scriptures in formulating the beliefs and teachings of the church. A discussion of this subject generally begins with her comment about the “lesser light” (White's writings) leading to the “greater light” (the Bible). This does not imply a diminishing importance assigned to the White writings, but is an indication of the highest esteem in which she always held the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, a popular perception exists in parts of our church that some of its spokespersons over the years have referenced E. G. White's writings as a convenient substitute for Scripture, a kind of third testament, especially when dealing with some current topics to which the Bible has given little or ambiguous attention. At other times, believers of good will have disagreed over a certain point of interpretation of the Bible, perhaps in eschatology, only to turn to Ellen White as the final doctrinal arbiter. She would not have supported that role for herself. Even cardinal teachings in the Adventist Church, such as origins, eschatology, prophetic inter-

pretation, and the sanctuary, must be based in Scripture alone.

Meanwhile, individuals looking at the Adventist Church from outside, have at times noticed the extraordinarily important role attributed to Ellen White in the teachings of Adventists, sometimes before their attention was drawn to the primary importance of the Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice. This church really does have a prophet in its midst, some have concluded. Actually, this church has had many, and (except for Ellen White) they are all found in the Scriptures! Some prominent Adventist preachers refer to Ellen G. White in their sermons as “a well-known religious writer” just in case there are some neighbors and friends in attendance, who have not yet learned about the proper role of the “Spirit of Prophecy” in our church. But if our theology really is based exclusively on Scripture, we would not be uncertain about the way we refer to or use the writings of E. G. White, and we would not need to hide her identity from the uninitiated.

Fortunately, in moments of calm reflection, perhaps after a lengthy discussion, E. G. White herself and most church members have (at times reluctantly, but nevertheless confidently) affirmed that the Protestant heritage of our church makes it imperative that its faith and teachings are based exclusively on Scripture. In response to questions by other Christian groups, that position was reiterated officially in the church publication, *Questions on Doctrine* (1957, 2003). Of course, that does not preclude E. G. White from holding doctrinal positions of her own, nor from participating actively in theological discussion, nor from taking sides when coming to a “fork in the road,” as it were. For example, in the 1888 discussions on grace and righteousness by faith, she took the side of “grace.” One can only guess about what side she would have chosen if she had been alive during the *Questions on Doctrine* discussion, the Bible Conferences in the 1950s, and beyond. But in the end, there is good reason to believe that she would have stood by Scripture alone for doctrinal authority and by the Cross alone for salvation by faith. We must do the same. That is the only way to state our beliefs and witness to our faith in a convincing and lasting way. And it is the only proper way to introduce the writings of Ellen White. The church, its members and leaders, cannot afford to equivocate in this area.

But if so, is there still an important place waiting in the church for E. G. White and her writings in our time—after we have affirmed once and for all that our doctrines and beliefs really are based on Scriptures alone? What role would she seek for herself and her writings considering this affirmation? What place is left for her? She would surely want us to use her writings and influence to drive us back to the Scriptures. The Bible, she always said, would help us mature in spiritual and theological understanding, keep us growing in faith and good works, plan for and develop institutions and initiatives for the proclamation of the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people before the great judgment day of the Lord!

By way of an illustration, Denis Fortin in this volume draws attention to White as a devotional writer who leads her readers to Christ, and, in the process, to the great church doctrine of righteousness by faith as found in Scripture—for example, in her book, *Steps to Christ*. That is no small matter. It is of utmost importance in the life of the church and sorely needed. It might even be said that without her influence the little revival movement that in 1863 became the Seventh-day Adventist Church would most likely never have launched. She accomplished that by serving as a co-founder of the church in which she never held elected office, but over which she exerted a huge influence. She did not avoid controversy over her role in the church, but through it all retained her influence simply by serving as a messenger from a higher power. We owe a lot to her, her teachings, her counsel, and her writings.

A third criticism of E. G. White is not really a criticism at all, but a sense of abandonment, as children may feel abandoned when they leave home and move on, or simply a feeling of being left behind by the passing of time. And time, including the time of E. G. White, has been passing. Think for a moment about the following facts.

Ellen Harmon was born in 1827, the year Beethoven died as it happened—nearly two hundred years ago. As a seventeen-year-old girl she participated in the Millerite revival movement leading up to the disappointment of 1844. It was followed by the organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863 nearly twenty years later. The first Adventist college was opened in 1874 in North America, followed by ten others in rapid succession during the next thirty years; the first official missionary was sent abroad in 1874; a new Adventist revival took place in 1888; at least four health care institutions were established during her life time; the General Conference church headquarters moved to the nation's capital, just as America stood on the cusp of changing from a country of refugees and immigrants to the greatest world power. Meanwhile the proclamation of the three angels' messages spread rapidly “to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” throughout the world. E. G. White never wavered in her faith as the years rolled by. Throughout her long life, right up to the moment of her own death in 1915, she expected Christ's soon return. Her death occurred a little more than a hundred years after the French Revolution about which she wrote extensively and just two years before the Russian revolution in 1917 of which she was unaware. Similarly, she never spoke about World War II, nor the atomic age, nor space exploration, nor did she see China competing with America for influence in the world, nor the rise of Islam on the strength of the energy resources in the Middle East, nor the growth of Catholicism, nor the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, nor secularism in America. Clearly, the world she expected to end soon has since changed beyond anything she could have anticipated.

If she could return today, to view the progress of the cause she helped establish and served so well, she would be astonished. The three angels' messages have indeed

been proclaimed so successfully around the world that 95 percent of Adventist Church members now belong to the “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” part, as it were, while a mere 5 percent of church members remain in what was her home bases. And the church membership which stood at around 3,500 in 1863, the year the church was organized, has grown to nearly 25 million plus children (and untold millions of former Adventists, according to some estimates). In addition to these changes in numbers, there have been even greater changes in the daily life and the thoughts of church members. Indeed, one way to catch a glimpse of life in the time of E. G. White is to visit her houses in Battle Creek, Michigan, Sunnyside in Australia, or Elmshaven in California, or any other nineteenth-century museum in America. Her time was different from ours in matters great and small. Terrie Aamodt and Gilbert Valentine in this book draw attention to aspects of her personal life (regarding which she is often cited) such as marriage and family, child rearing, personality and temperament, and interpersonal relationships. Even to understand her private life we need to be aware of the profound changes since her time.

Not only has daily life changed. The world has changed, and with it, the corporate life of the church. Whole continents and their people, once viewed by the church as distant mission fields, are now home to the vast majority of Adventist Church members. These “new” members are far removed in time and location from the European conflicts between the Roman church and the Protestant churches some of whose members sought religious freedom in America. As a result, the Adventist Church, once a Eurocentric church, has become a *de facto* church of the developing world with its center of gravity located somewhere between Rio de Janeiro and Nairobi! That is the world in which we must give a voice to our prophet, the world in which most church members now live.

On a more theological level, we know that E. G. White endorsed the reinterpretation of the “sanctuary and judgment” teaching following “the first great disappointment” in 1844. But it is uncertain how she would relate to “the second great disappointment of the delay” now 180 years later. Would she call us back to the Bible to dig deeper for fresh answers and renewed hope, or urge the church to stay the course? We can only guess. But if all these gaps in time and circumstances between her time and ours are left unattended, they could lead to a growing ignorance of the time and place of E. G. White and a quiet disregard of many of her messages as though no longer applicable to the challenges of our very different time and place now. How do we bridge that gap?

The best way to respond to that gap in time and location between hers and ours is by a thoughtful process of interpretation and application of her writings, as we have long done with the Scriptures. Without that, criticism of her writings, or worse, quiet disregard of her counsel will likely continue.

We have already seen examples of that. A few years ago, multiple international committees appointed simultaneously were charged to advise church leaders regarding ordination of women to ministry. The committee findings were inconclusive, and the General Conference committee received three reports, one for, one against, and a third somewhere in between. The reason for this failure most likely had to do with the lack of clear evidence on this matter in Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. The opposing reports cited essentially the same biblical and White references, but no real attempt was made to move the discussion from the Bible's time and her time to ours, through a process of interpretation and application.

Other similarly unresolved issues might be sports and recreation in the church and its educational institutions, participation in military service by young church members, the relationship between church and state, family and sexuality issues. The times have changed, but the resource material for the resolution of these matters have not been moved from "that time" to ours through a process of interpretation.

Given such an array of complex current issues facing the church, if we do not interpret E. G. White's writings from so far away and so long ago, her counsel will likely be overlooked or set aside or neglected in our place and time. For Americans, a parallel situation may be found in the way we relate to the U.S. Constitution, written in the eighteenth century, but continuously invoked to this day, so that the American nation can be guided by its founding principles in a changing environment. For this reason, the Constitution is not merely re-read and quoted, but regularly reinterpreted and its principles extended and applied to the present time by the Supreme Court. After all, the Constitution of 1787 said nothing at all about wiretapping, machine guns, abortion, homosexual marriage, or a host of other subjects upon which the Court has made authoritative pronouncements.

During such a process of interpretation and application of E.G. White's writings, we would inquire about her situation, the issues she faced, the intention of her counsel, her sense of mission, and her reliance upon a strong faith in God. In such a process, we will discover first what she said in her time and place, and what that would mean in our time and place. Then E. G. White would remain our religious and spiritual companion going forward—a spiritual mother (or grandmother) in the Adventist Church. It is that same process every pastor brings into the pulpit every Sabbath morning when God's word in the ancient Scriptures from distant lands becomes God's living word to our church in our time and in our language.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

## Reclaiming the Prophet

1 All of Ellen White's published books, as well as her letters and manuscripts, may be found at <https://m.egwwritings.org>. See *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White* (1888 edition), 131-134 for Ellen White's description of her early childhood, her twin, and her facial injury.

2 Ellen White's report of the last days of her father's life was published in "They Sleep in Jesus," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 31, No. 19 (April 21, 1868), 297. Her private comments about her sisters during that visit are found in her diary, Greenville, Michigan, April 10, 1868, (MS 15) *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, Ellen G. White Estate.

3 *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (1868), 75.

4 "Talk/The Foundation of Our Faith," May 18, 1904, (MS 46, 1904), *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 19, Ellen G. White Estate.

5 "Our Late Experience (Concluded)," *Review*, Vol. 27, No. 13 (Feb. 27, 1866), 97.

6 MS 1 (1867) *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, Ellen G. White Estate. The Ellen G. White Estate notes that this account was actually written in the early 1880s.

7 The letters between Ellen and James White and between Ellen White and Lucinda Hall in May 1876 are important for understanding the Whites' complex marital dynamic. It would be best to follow up the brief description given here by reading the entire sequence of 1876 letters at <https://m.egwwritings.org> in Ellen White to J. S. White May 12 (Letters 25 and 25a) and May 14 (Letter 26); Ellen White to Lucinda Hall May 10, 12, 16, 17 (Letters 64, 65, 66, 67) *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 3. Although Ellen White quickly regretted her strong words to Lucinda Hall and asked her to burn the letters, her friend did not do so. The Ellen G. White Estate has supplied contextual information online with these letters.

8 James White's biographer, Gerald Wheeler, supplies informative details on the final months of James' life in *James White: Innovator and Overcomer* (Hagerstown, MD, *Review and Herald*, 2003), 213-233. See also MS 6, (1876), *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 3, Ellen White, and Ellen White to W. C. White, September 12, 1881 (Letter 17). Her 1906 recollection of James is found in MS 131 (1906), *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 21, "Interview with Mrs. E. G. White Regarding Early Experiences."

9 *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1860), 107.

10 *Ibid.*, 129-132.

11 *Ibid.*, 165-167.

12 *Ibid.*, 210.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 212.

15 *Ibid.*, 211.

16 *Ibid.*, 212.

17 White described the conflicts she experienced while trying to construct clothing for the family while writing articles for the *Review* in a letter to Lucinda Hall, June 19, 1861 (Letter 27), in *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 1. Her letters to Lucinda can be as revealing of her inner self as her diary entries.

18 Vance explains the role of the domestic sphere for women and Ellen White's stepping away from traditional female roles, in "Gender," *Ellen*

*Harmon White: American Prophet* (New York, Oxford University Press), 280, 281.

19 *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2, 296.

20 Joan Hedrick, "Writing a Woman's Life," Lecture, University of Southern Maine, Oct. 22, 2009.

21 W. C. White, "Sketches and Memories of James and Ellen White 39: An Eastern Tour Beginning with Joy and Ending with Sorrow," *Review*, Vol. 113, No. 60 (Dec. 10, 1936), 7.

22 Ellen White to James Edson White, October 19, 1865, (Letter 7) *Letters and Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, Ellen G. White Estate.

23 Henry Adams, "The Boys of New England," from *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907).

24 Henry Ward Beecher and William Drysdale, *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1887) cited in David and Hilary Chrystal, *Words on Words: Quotations about Language and Languages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 177.

25 Thomas D. Hann, *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 101

26 This pattern of nuancing assertions made in previous, more forceful letters is evidenced in the extended "Interview with Dr. and Mrs. Sanderson," August 25, 1901. EGWE-GC.

27 Ellen White to Cyrenius and Louisa Smith, July 9, 1859. EGWE-GC. Ellen had visited the Smiths at their request to explain to them the meaning of a vision about them in the context of their particular circumstances as they understood them. As she thought about the visit afterwards, she realized that trying to explain the vision somehow "explained much of the force of the vision away" and she resolved not to do this again. See the discussion in Gilbert Valentine, *J. N. Andrews: Mission Pioneer, Evangelist and Thought Leader* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019) 243, 263.

28 Gilbert Valentine, *The Prophet and the Presidents: Ellen White's Influence on the Leadership of the Early Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2011) 125-127.

29 Marian De Berg, *Stories from Sunnyside: Ellen White in Australia, 1891-1900* (Warburton, Vic.: Signs Publishing, 2017) 10, 11.

30 Ella M. Robinson interview with James Nix, (1967). Loma Linda University Heritage Room.

31 George Knight, *Walking With Ellen White*, (Hagerstown, MD: *Review and Herald*, 1999) 17-24

32 E G. White to A. J. Sanderson, October 6, 1901. (MR 1341), EGWE-DC.

33 Ellen G. White "Interview with Dr. and Mrs. Sanderson," August, 1901. EGWE-DC.

34 Ellen G. White to A. J. Sanderson, October 6, 1901. EGWE-DC.

35 Ellen G. White to Edson and Emma White, December 7, 1891 (Letter 32a, 1891). EGWE-DC.

36 Avondale School Board Minutes, April 14, 1900.

37 C. B. Hughes to W. C. White, July 22, 1912 in Walter C. Utt Papers, Pacific Union College. See also Milton Hook, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora (Coorangbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 1998) 56, 57.*

38 "A Profitable Day," *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1870, 152.

39 Merlin Burt, "For Jesus and Scripture:

The Life of Ellen G. White" in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013) 23.

40 *Ibid.*, 19, 27.

41 Knight, 37-40.

42 Several typical incidents are discussed in Valentine, *J. N. Andrews*, 344-346.

43 *Ibid.*, 72-77.

44 Hook, 56. See also John Skrzypaszek, "Avondale Health Retreat, Australia (1899-1935)," Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=67SX&highlight=Avondale|Health|Retreat>

45 Jerry Moon, "Nashville Sanitarium," *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, 1001.

46 Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (Battle Creek, Steam Press, 1860) 14.

47 Theodore N. Levterov, *Accepting Ellen White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017).

48 James White, "Tent Meetings," *Review and Herald*, June 8, 1869, 192.

49 Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: the Lonely Years*, 3.412.

50 Gilbert Valentine, *The Prophet and the Presidents*, 304-337.

51 *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2, 26-30.

52 Ellen G. White to S. M. I Henry, June 21, 1899. EGWE-DC.

53 The articles had been written by a prominent Adventist preacher, W. H. Littlejohn, "Danger in Adopting Extreme Views," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 3, 1894, 210. A discussion of the episode can be found in *The Prophet and the Presidents*, 330, 331.

54 The incident involved decapitation of a fellow believer, and it seems clear in d'Aubigné's account that some kind of sad mental health problem underlay the episode. But it still made good fodder for his denigration of Anabaptists.

55 *Review and Herald*, April 10, 1894, 227.

56 Ellen White had commented that "the Loud Cry," a key marker of the very end of time, had already begun. There were also outbreaks of faith healing. See the discussion of this episode in Gilbert M. Valentine, *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 88, 89 and in George Knight, *A. T. Jones: Point Man on Adventism's Charismatic Frontier* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2011) 98-112.

57 The physical response to reading the articles might be considered "extreme." Ellen White reports that at times during the night she felt unable to "get a free breath" and had to walk her room, thinking she might die. Did the worry over the content of the articles induce a spike in her blood pressure level? Ellen White to "Brethren in the Seventh-day Adventist Faith," June 7, 1894. EGWE-DC.

58 *Ibid.*

59 Ellen G. White to "Brethren," North Fitzroy Church, 1898. EGWE-DC.

60 See Valentine, *J. N. Andrews*, 251-253.

61 Ellen White's last sad letter to J. N. Andrews is an example of a pain-inflicting communication developed out of this complex matrix of motivations and misunderstanding. It calls up long memories of past perceived wrongs magnified by time. See Valentine, *J. N. Andrews*, 704-708.

62 Ellen G. White to S. M. I. Henry, June 21, 1899. EGWE-DC.

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Steps to Christ*, 57, 58.

65 This section is adapted from a presentation made at the Adventist Society for Religious Studies at San Antonio, November 17, 2023 and in the chapter, "And there was war in Heaven"—Ellen White and John Milton on the Cosmic Conflict and Its Theological and Pastoral Implications," in Lena Toews, ed., *Cosmic Conflict: Up-to-Date or Out-of-Date* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, forthcoming 2025).

66 Ruth Elizabeth Burgeson, "A Comparative Study of the Fall of Man as Treated by John Milton and Ellen G. White" (MA thesis, Pacific Union College, 1957).

67 Heidi Olson Campbell and Michael Campbell, "Milton, John," in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 985.

68 Burgeson, 73. Rather surprisingly, in order to account for the many similarities between the two narratives, Burgeson concluded that both authors must have been inspired. Burgeson, 75. Another more recent study also came to similar conclusions. In his dissertation at the City University of New York, Ian Bickford sought to point out the "real," "identifiable," and "valuable presence" of "the shadow of Milton in Seventh-day Adventism" and especially in the writings of Ellen White. Ian Bickford, "The Thief of Paradise: Milton and Seventh-day Adventism" (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 2010), xix. Other comparative studies of Milton and Ellen White come to similar conclusions. See Karen Clausen-Brown's (Walla Walla University) paper presented at the San Diego meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies in 2014 and Chris Bird, *The Plagiarius Prophet: Comparing the Parallels between Milton's Paradise Lost (1667) and Ellen White's Story of Redemption* (Kindle, 2016).

69 Arthur L. White, "Ellen G. White's Portrayal of the Great Controversy Story" (Washington, D.C., 1969) published in the 1969 facsimile reproduction of Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, (volume 4): *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press and Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1884), 507-549. Arthur White admitted that his grandmother "did later read at least portions of *Paradise Lost*, for there is one phrase quoted in *Education*" (*Ibid.*, 536; see, *Education*, 150; *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 1-4).

70 The narrative in *Patriarchs and Prophets* becomes a little over 15,000 words with much of the additional material being many added biblical quotations. In *Patriarchs and Prophets*, the narrative starts from the perspective of God's love.

71 See Warren C. Trenchard, *The Desire of Ages and Its Sources: Condensed Edition of "Life of Christ Research Project"* by Fred Veltman (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2023); Robert W. Olson, *One Hundred and One Questions about the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981).

72 In the Appendix, I gave references to

antecedents of all the sentences and paragraphs I could find. Unbeknownst to me, Kevin Morgan, a pastor in North Carolina, had done this work and had also searched for non-Adventist authors Ellen White had used in *Steps to Christ*. Before the publication of the new edition, he gave me access to his research, and we compared our findings.

73 *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), *Prophets and Kings* (1917), *The Desire of Ages* (1898), *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911), and *The Great Controversy* (1888, 1911). The themes of these books were first discussed in the series *Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 volumes (1870-1884).

74 In fact, Ellen White had at times varying interpretations of some biblical stories. While Marian Davis worked on the manuscripts of *The Desire of Ages* and *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, she remarked to W. C. White that she was often careful in her editing of Ellen White's manuscripts to avoid inserting in a new book a fact or an interpretation of some biblical passage that did not harmonize with other prior publications of Ellen White. As she read Ellen White's manuscripts for a chapter, she would make sure some facts or interpretations were not used if they conflicted with what had already been published. (Marian Davis to J. E. White, December 22, 1895, quoted in Trenchard, *The Desire of Ages and Its Sources*, 42.) As a redactor, Marian Davis was Ellen White's first guardian of her internal harmony. That would explain, then, that Marian Davis would have pushed aside and never included in a chapter of *The Desire of Ages* a comment found in the manuscript which served as the basis of the chapter, "In Pilate's Judgment Hall" (see Manuscript 112, 1897; *The Desire of Ages*, 723-740). Surprisingly, in this manuscript (paragraph 47), Ellen White described Jesus as the antitype of the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16! Well before *The Desire of Ages* came out, Ellen White had interpreted, along with what other Adventist interpreters had stated, that the antitype of the scapegoat will be Satan on the day of the final judgment. In 1888, in *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White had concluded, "As the priest, in removing the sins from the sanctuary, confessed them upon the head of the scapegoat, so Christ will place all these sins upon Satan, the originator and instigator of sin" (485).

75 C. C. Crisler to M. C. Wilcox, December 14, 1914. "We take it for granted in the office that sister White has been led by the Lord in her failure to make any serious attempt to deal with prophetic scripture in an exegetical manner. She has drawn lessons from all scripture, of whatsoever nature; but these lessons have been of a practical nature, such as would be drawn from scripture by any good preacher who knows how to reach the human heart. To use theological terms, she is a homilist rather than an exegete."

76 *Prophets and Kings*, 227.

77 *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 330.

78 *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 359-362.

79 *Education*, 51-70.

80 *Education*, 57. This quote is not original with Ellen White and appeared in various newspapers and journals as early as 1866 in the Junction City (Kansas) *Weekly Union* (June 2, 1866), the *Buffalo Daily Courier* (June 16, 1866), the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* (July 6, 1866), and the *Cape Ann Light* and Gloucester

(Massachusetts) *Telegraph* (July 14, 1866). See Kevin Morgan, "Surprising Authorship of 'The Great Want of This Age' Quotation," at [https://www.academia.edu/31885465/Surprising\\_Authorship\\_of\\_The\\_Great\\_Want\\_of\\_This\\_Age\\_Quotation\\_Updated\\_20\\_August\\_2017](https://www.academia.edu/31885465/Surprising_Authorship_of_The_Great_Want_of_This_Age_Quotation_Updated_20_August_2017).

81 *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:28

82 *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 331, 342; *The Desire of Ages*, 758-764.

83 *Adventist Home*, 545; *In Heavenly Places*, 367; *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 61.

84 See for examples, Gerhard Pfandl, "Ellen G. White and Hermeneutics," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, George W. Reid, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 314-318.

85 *The Acts of the Apostles*, 333.

86 William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life and The Spirit of Love*, Paul G. Stanwood, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 47. The first edition of *A Serious Call* was published in 1728.

87 In 1987, retired professor of theology, Edward Heppenstall commented that "the chief value of Ellen White's writings lies in their guidance for our spiritual lives. They call forth certainty and assurance in Christ that give us Christian freedom and the joy of a triumphant Christian experience." "The Inspired Witness of Ellen White," *Adventist Review*, May 7, 1987, 16.

88 Bunk means "nonsense." The truthfulness of the three remarks related to bunk will be treated in this chapter's concluding remarks.

89 For a fuller presentation of the issues raised in these opening paragraphs, see my *Ellen White's Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, Enlightening Research* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019).

90 W. C. White to S. N. Haskell, Oct 31, 1912; emphasis supplied. See also George R. Knight, "The Case of the Overlooked Postscript: A Footnote on Inspiration," *Ministry*, August 1997, 2-11.

91 "General Conference Proceedings," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1883, 741; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, D. C: Review and Herald, 1958), 21.

92 David Paulson to E. G. White, Apr. 19, 1906.

93 E. G. White to David Paulson, June 14, 1906.

94 E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), vii.

95 E. G. White, "Morning Talk by Ellen G. White," Oct. 24, 1888, MS 9, 1888. For a discussion of the use of authority at the 1888 meetings, see G. R. Knight, *Angry Saints* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 121-140.

96 S. N. Haskell to W. W. Prescott, Nov. 15, 1907; E. G. White, "Our Attitude Toward Doctrinal Controversy," MS 11, 1910.

97 E. G. White, "The Value of Bible Study," *Review and Herald*, July 17, 1888, 449; emphasis supplied.

98 1910.

99 W. C. White to L. E. Froom, Jan. 8, 1928.

100 W. C. White to W. W. Eastman, Nov. 4, 1912.

101 A. G. Daniells in "The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy," 137 in Knight, *Ellen White's Afterlife*. That volume has the entire 1919 Bible Conference minutes

that pertain to Ellen White along with several other primary documents in their entirety.

102 E. G. White, "Testimonials," *Signs of the Times*, Feb. 22, 1883, 96; E. G. White, "Holiday Gifts," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1882, 789.

103 S. N. Haskell to a conference president, Sept. 23, 1919; A. G. Daniells, in "Use of the Spirit of Prophecy," 141 in *Ellen White's Afterlife*.

104 A. T. Jones, "The Gifts: Their Presence and Object," *Home Missionary* [Extra], Dec. 1894, 12; Emphasis in original.

105 A. G. Daniells, in "Use of the Spirit of Prophecy," 141 in *Ellen White's Afterlife*; J. N. Anderson, in "Inspiration of the Spirit of Prophecy," 156 in *Ellen White's Afterlife*.

106 Claude E. Holmes, Have We an Infallible "Spirit of Prophecy?" Apr. 1, 1920; emphasis supplied.

107 B. L. House, *Analytical Studies in Bible Doctrines for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges* (Berrien Springs, MI: College Press for the General Conference Department of Education, 1926), 66; F. M. Wilcox, "The Testimony of Jesus," *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1946, 62.

108 Donald R. McAdams, "Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen G. White Studies in the 1970s," *Spectrum*, Mar. 1980, 27-41; Donald R. McAdams, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians: A Study of the Treatment of John Huss in *Great Controversy*, Chapter Six 'Huss and Jerome'" (unpublished manuscript, rev. Oct. 1977, 19).

109 Eric Anderson, "Ellen White and Reformation Historians," *Spectrum*, July 1978, 24; E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 1911, xii; McAdams, "Shifting Views," 34; Benjamin McArthur, "Point of the Spear: Adventist Liberalism and the Study of Ellen White in the 1970s," *Spectrum*, Spring 2008, 48.

110 Minutes of Committee on Ellen White's Use of Sources, in *Ellen White's Afterlife*, 94-97.

111 Neal C. Wilson, "This I Believe About Ellen G. White," *Adventist Review*, Mar. 20, 1980, 8-10.

112 McAdams, "Shifting Views," 38.

113 E. G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 196.

114 George R. Knight highlights some of the most important contributions in his book, *Ellen White's Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, Enlightening Research* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019); among the most important are *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2nd ed., 2013) and *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, eds. Terrie Dopp Aarnodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Jonathan Butler, "Seventh-day Adventist Historiography: A Work in Progress," *Church History* 87, No. 1 (March. 2018: 165). Most recently, in addition to Knight see Dennis Fortin, ed., *Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2017); Denis Kaiser, *Trust and Doubt: Perceptions of Divine Inspiration in Seventh-day Adventist History* (Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, 2019); Ron Graybill, *Visions & Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White's Writings* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn, 2019); Don Casebolt, *Father Miller's Daughter* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1922); Warren Trenchard, *The Desire of Ages and*

*Its Sources: Condensed Edition of "Life of Christ Research Project Report: by Fred Veltman* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn, 2023); and Donald R. McAdams, *Ellen White and the Historians: A Neglected Problem and a Forgotten Answer* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn, 2022) have published significant books that cannot be ignored.

115 "While I am writing out important matter, He is beside me, helping me. He lays out my work before me, and when I am puzzled for a fit word with which to express my thought, He brings it clearly and distinctly to my mind." <<https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14067.8106001?hl>> "The goodness of the Lord to me is very great. I praise his name that my mind is clear on Bible subjects. The Spirit of God works upon my mind and gives me appropriate words with which to express the truth. I am also greatly strengthened when I stand before large congregations." <<https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14072.7586001#7586001>>. "When writing these precious books, if I hesitated, the very word I wanted to express the idea was given me." <<https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14072.8363001#8363001>>. I wish to thank Douglas Hackleman for bringing these letters to my attention.

116 My summary of these events, which occurred in Battle Creek, is based on Ronald D. Graybill's comprehensive account in his pathbreaking book, *Visions & Revisions*.

117 This dialog was recreated by Graybill from W. C. White's report of the meeting in his letter to Mary Kelsey White, Dec. 31, 1882, Graybill, 81, 82.

118 Mary K. White to W. C. White, Jan 7, 1883, cited in Graybill, 85.

119 W. C. White to M. K. White, October 25, 1883, cited in Graybill, 85.

120 And revisions continued through the six printings that occurred prior to the General Conference session of November 1883. Graybill, 29-43.

121 Vol. 30 (Oct. 8, 1867).

122 W. C. White to M. K. White, November 20, 1883, cited in Graybill, 89.

123 "General Conference Proceedings," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 60 (Nov. 27, 1883), cited by Graybill, 89, 90.

124 Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 15.

125 Numbers notes that in the 1890s, when Dr. Daniel Kress noticed the similarities between L. B. Coles's *Philosophy of Health* and White's *How to Live* his response was, "Isn't it wonderful that the Lord should put this into two minds at different times." 195.

126 The following pages on this turning point are taken, sometimes directly, from my book, *Ellen White and the Historians*, 14-26.

127 "An Authentic Interview between Elder G. W. Amadon, Elder A. C. Bourdeau and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg in Battle Creek, Michigan on October 7th, 1907," 32, 33. This is an unpublished stenographic report. F. D. Nichol attempts to discredit it by calling it "the unsupported charge of a man who was openly hostile to the denomination in general and Mrs. White in particular, who looked back twenty three years, through the distorting vapors of that hostility to an alleged incident of 1884." Francis D. Nichol, *Ellen G.*

## Reclaiming the Prophet

*White and Her Critics* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1945), 416.

128 Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* [1888], 13.

129 *The Great Controversy* [1888], 12, 13.

130 D. M. Canright, *Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced* (Kalamazoo: Kalamazoo Publishing Co. Print, 1888).

131 Nichol, 467.

132 Letter 56, 1911, quoted in A. L. White, *The Later Elmhaven Years* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 304.

133 Arthur White notes that 417 quotations in the book—drawn from 75 authors, 10 periodicals, and three encyclopedias—needed be checked. He does not note that virtually all these sources were simply those quoted by the few authors on whom Ellen White based her writing. *Ibid.*, 308.

134 Arthur White minimizes the importance of these changes. They were simply to select “words more precise in their meaning than those first employed by the author, to set forth facts and truths more correctly and accurately.” His way of saying that historical errors were corrected is “in cases where facts might be challenged,” changes were made so that every statement “could be supported by available reference works of ready access.” *Ibid.*, 306.

135 Graybill, *Visions and Revisions*, 151-170, is my source for what follows.

136 Graybill, 152.

137 Clarence Crisler, Dores Robinson, Mary Steward, H. Camden Lacey, Jean Vuilleumier, and Guy Dail.

138 One of Graybill’s examples is a statement in the 1888 *The Great Controversy* that said the “Waldensians were the first or all the peoples of Europe to obtain a translation of the Holy Scriptures.” Given Prescott’s evidence that this was not so, the statement was changed to say that the “Waldensians were among the first ....” Graybill, 158.

139 Graybill, 159. Graybill’s source is his article “How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources,” *Spectrum*, vol. 4 (Summer 1972), 49-53.

140 Haskell to W. C. White, June 4, 1911, quoted in Graybill, 153, 154.

141 “An Authentic Interview,” 28, 29. Kellogg is actually advising Dr. Charles Stewart to add such a statement if he made public his evidence of plagiarism. I believe it is fair to state that Kellogg was stating what he himself believed.

142 Ellen White to Bolton, Letter 7, p. 27 in *The Fannie Bolton Story: A Collection of Source Documents*, White Estate, quoted in Alice Elizabeth Gregg, “Fannie’s Folly: Part I of the Unfinished Story of Fannie Bolton and Marian Davis,” *Adventist Currents*, October 1993, 26. I wish to thank Douglas Hackleman for bringing this article to my attention.

143 In his massive report on the “Life of Christ Research Project” Fred Veltman makes an interesting point on this question: “A very serious question that still remains regarding Ellen White’s use of sources is the concern over her non-admission or even denial of dependency, whether implicit or explicit. How do we square her statements, and similar ones made by her associates, with the textual evidence? Any attempt to address this problem of incongruity should include

a serious study of Ellen White’s self-understanding of inspiration and her prophetic role in the context of nineteenth century views on inspiration, especially within Adventism.” Fred Veltman, “Life of Christ Research Project Report,” 915, 916. <https://archive.org/details/FredVeltmanLifeOfChristResearchProject1988/page/n1500/mode/1up>. I wish to thank Warren Trenchard for bringing this source to my attention.

144 Prescott to White, April 6, 1915, Appendix B (p. 89) in Gilbert M. Valentine, “The Church ‘drifting toward a crisis’: Prescott’s 1915 Letter to William White,” *Catalyst*, Vol. 2 (November 2007), 32-94. <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/white/valentine-drifting.htm>.

145 Michael Campbell, in his book, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019) sets the conference in the broader context of the impact of World War I on Adventist prophetic thinking and the rise of Fundamentalism in America, which is helpful, but I don’t see that this context has much to do with the discussions at the conference on the spirit of prophecy. From the founding of the church the prevailing view of Ellen White’s writings had been fundamentalist.

146 Benjamin McArthur, *A. G. Daniells: Shaper of Twentieth-Century Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 387.

147 Campbell, 63.

148 These discussions are well-covered by Michael Campbell, and the transcripts of the most significant discussion, the “round-table talk” of July 30, and August 1, are printed in Knight’s *Ellen White’s Afterlife*. See also <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/1919BC/RBC19190730.pdf>

149 Knight, 130, 144.

150 Knight, 145.

151 Knight, 146.

152 Knight, 152.

153 Knight, 160.

154 Knight, 160.

155 Knight, 172.

156 Knight, 162.

157 Knight, 170.

158 The aftermath of the 1919 Bible Conference is told well by Ben McArthur in his Daniells biography, Michael Campbell in his book on the Bible Conference, and George Knight in *Ellen White’s Afterlife*

159 See George Knight, “A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs” (*Review and Herald*, 2020) 137, 138. Knight mentions a General Conference-sponsored textbook by Benjamin L. House, *Analytical Studies in Bible Doctrines for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges* (Berrien Springs, MI: College Press, 1926) which advocated inerrancy (p. 66). For the next two or three decades this book became the standard for Adventist colleges. I am indebted to Gil Valentine for this information.

160 See Richard Hammill, *Memoirs of an Adventist Administrator* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992).

161 *Spectrum* provided an outlet for Ellen White research and stimulated fresh thinking on a host of issues facing Adventism. Gilbert Valentine has written a detailed account of the origins of AAF and *Spectrum* and an analysis of its contribution along with its

weakness in an article for *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. At time of writing, it has not yet been published on the website.

162 Roy Branson and Herold Weiss, "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," *Spectrum*, Autumn 1970, 30-33.

163 William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical study of Ellen White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum*, Autumn 1970, 57-69.

164 Ronald Graybill, "Ellen G. White's Account of Luther's Experience from Worms to Wartburg," Unpublished, May 1977; Gary Land, "Faith, History and Ellen White," *Spectrum*, March 1978, 50-55; Jonathan Butler, "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World," *Spectrum*, August 1979, 2-13; This paper cannot fully cover the Ellen White research of the 1970s. The best summary remains my *Spectrum* article, "Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen G. White Studies in the 1970s," *Spectrum*, March 1980, 27-41, which is reprinted in *Ellen White and the Historians*. The must-read book on this period, because of its depth and compelling narrative, is Gilbert M. Valentine's *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Changes in Adventism 1966-1979* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn Publishing, 2022). Based on primary sources, including many letters of General Conference President Robert H. Pierson, the letters and diary of Richard Hammill, and the diary of Siegfried Horn, Valentine tells the back story of church leaders struggling to save the church—which for them meant preserving the authority of Ellen White—from liberal professors in the seminary, earth scientists at the Geoscience Research Institute, and historians.

165 New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

166 McAdams, "Shifting Views," 24; also, in *Ellen White and the Historians*, 180.

167 Most of these negotiations occurred after I left Andrews University. In 1975 I accepted the presidency of Southwestern Union College. I was given full support during these years by Southwestern Union Conference president Ben Leach.

168 Molleurus Couperus, "The Bible Conference of 1919," *Spectrum*, May 1979, 23-57.

169 Rea, who had visited me at Southwestern Adventist College, had for several years been sending me papers and letters. Quoting my journal, "I have refrained from responding because I could see he wanted me to endorse his work, and that I could not do because his research was so sloppy and his attitude so bad." Vol. 9, 123.

170 The best and as far as I know the only account of the Rea story is a well-documented and perceptive two-part article by T. Joe Willey in *Spectrum News/Views*, "The Great Controversy Over Plagiary: The Last Interview of Walter Rea," Part One, January 5, 2017 <<https://spectrumpmagazine.org/views/interviews/great-controversy-over-plagiary-last-interview-walter-re/>>. My summary is taken from this article.

171 McAdams Journal, Vol 9, 124, 125.

172 Douglas Hackleman, "GC Committee Studies Ellen White's Sources," *Spectrum*, vol. 10 No.4, 9-15, provides a short summary of this meeting of the General Conference Committee. His article also lists

the committee members.

173 Wilson, "This I Believe," *Review*, March 20, 1980, 8. Also cited in McAdams, *Ellen White and the Historians*, 186. I believe that Neal Wilson was sincerely open to the Ellen White research and much more willing to turn than many of his General Conference colleagues. On October 12, while attending the Annual Council in Washington, Wilson complimented me on my Huss paper, told me he was going to appoint me to the Rea committee, and added: "We don't know what the truth is, but we are going to find out and face it openly no matter what it is." McAdams Journal, Vol. 9, 123.

174 In late 1978 Robert Olson, who had recently replaced Arthur White as secretary of the White Estate, had recommended such a research project for a different reason. Rea and others were investigating the originality of *The Desire of Ages* and Olson was getting lots of questions. As he put it in a letter to his colleagues at the White Estate on November 29, "We might wish that all such investigations would cease, but our wishing will not bring about any such results I am confident. It seems to me that we have only two alternatives. One is that we shall be involved in the research in one way or another. The second alternative is that we shall withdraw from it altogether and simply react to the work of others after they have completed their research. If we accept the latter alternative, I fear that it will affect our credibility rating in the eyes of our Bible teachers." But though specific plans were considered, involving James Cox, chairman of the New Testament Department at the Seminary, nothing came of this recommendation. The letter is quoted in full by Walter Rea, *The White Lie*, reprinted edition (Bowling Green, KY: Onestone, 2021), 101-105.

175 Arthur White to General Conference officers and others, November 18, 1979, cited in Gilbert M. Valentine, "Glacier View Sanctuary Review Conference (1980)," first published January 29, 2020, *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* <<https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=79CV>>. Valentine's paper is my source for these events. It provides an excellent account of the Ford controversy. Ford's presentation to the Angwin Adventist Forum was intended to be a response to Robert Brinsmead's recent and strident attack on the investigative judgment doctrine. Ford agreed with the exegetical problems Brinsmead raised, but did not abandon belief in the doctrine. His proposal of what he thought was a theologically sound solution, however, was not heard above the furor created by discussion of such a sensitive issue in a public meeting. It is worth noting that many biblical scholars, such as Raymond Cottrell, Siegfried Horn, and Roland Loasby agreed with Ford's conclusions.

176 For background and analysis of the Ford controversy and the Glacier View conference, see Gilbert Valentine, "Fear and the Hidden Agendas of the Ford Controversy (1979-1980)," *Spectrum*, Vol. 47, Number 4. The quotation is from p. 31.

177 These two quotations are from T. Joe Willey in *Spectrum News/Views*, "The Great Controversy Over Plagiary." The primary source of the Olson quotation is a letter, Olson to Eryl A. Cummings, February 21, 1980.

178 For background on the development and

## Reclaiming the Prophet

approval of the 1980 Statement see Lawrence Geraty, "A New Statement of Fundamental Beliefs," *Spectrum*, Vol. 11, Number 1.

179 Author Patrick has written an important and insightful two-part article on the workshop: "The Inspired and Inspiring Ellen White, Part 1: 1982 in Historical Perspective" (July 2007) <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/white/patrick/egw-inspired.htm> and "Part 2: Assessing Five Examples of the Documented Evidence" (January 2008) <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/white/patrick/egw-inspired2.htm>

180 Report, p. 882, referenced in Warren C. Trenchard, *The Desire of Ages and Its Sources: Condensed Edition of "Life of Christ Research Project Report" by Fred Veltman* (Westlake Village: CA, 1923). Trenchard's book is the authoritative study of the Veltman report. He puts the report in context, summarizes it, and critiques the methodology. One of his conclusions is that the 31 percent of *The Desire of*

*Ages* identified by Veltman as being to some degree dependent on sources is "grossly understated as Veltman himself acknowledged." 242.

181 One must deny errors if one is to claim authority. This is why the critics of my Huss paper made such a big deal about errors. This is why Arthur White in his paper "Toward a Factual Concept of Inspiration II" (April 1978) and in his seven-article series in the *Review*, "The Ellen White Historical Writings" (July 12 to August 23, 1979)—both, in effect, his official responses to my paper—had to respond to the evidence of historical errors in the Huss manuscript. The evidence was too compelling to ignore. He at least conceded that errors were possible, but if they existed, they were insignificant errors about unimportant details. Both the paper and the *Review* articles are examined in my book, *Ellen White and the Historians*, 209-229.

## ELLEN WHITE FOR TODAY: AN APPEAL

**S**eventh-day Adventists face a crisis. Over the last fifty years, Ellen White has lost much of her influence among us. Adventists are now deeply divided, especially in the places where this “messenger of the Lord” lived and worked—the United States, Australia, and Europe. Many claim to affirm her spiritual gifts but avoid the hard work of responsibly applying her counsel in new situations. They say they are defending a precious tradition, but they refuse to repudiate outmoded applications or to consider new evidence. For them, it seems, Ellen White can do no wrong.

Other Adventists have demolished inaccurate claims for Mrs. White but have failed to rebuild on a sounder foundation. They invoke her language when convenient, but do not allow her writings to shape their choices. For too many, she has ceased to be a teacher.

Indeed, for a few, she can do no right.

Year by year, Ellen White’s prophetic voice loses its urgency and power. Soon she may be little more than a literary ornament in sermons—one that seldom moves hearts or changes minds.

As experienced scholars and administrators, we appeal to our fellow believers to reaffirm her value as a leader, preacher, and spiritual guide. Just as it is impossible to explain American democracy without Lincoln or to understand the Reformation without Luther, we affirm that the Advent movement will weaken its witness about the Sabbath, righteousness by faith, or the “blessed hope” if we leave out Ellen White and God’s leading in our founding.

We do not pretend to have all the answers to this crisis. But we know that it is urgent for us to listen anew to Ellen White, using everything we have learned about her humanity, her historical context, her literary sources, and her spiritual development to create a better understanding of her ministry. Whatever her imperfections, we need to acknowledge our profound debt to her in how we live, work, and hope.

This remarkable woman has much to teach both Adventists and the wider world. If we heed her, she will tell us to put the Bible first. She can show us how to combine health insights with ethical impulses, to create schools that build character, to affirm God’s transforming grace, and to rebuke any power that persecutes in the name of God.

Above all, she would still direct our steps toward Christ, illuminate the fullness of salvation, and strengthen our longing for the New Earth—even as we seek to ease the suffering of this old one.

“Ellen White for Today” Working Conference

Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History

Angwin, California, October 20-22, 2023

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**ERIC ANDERSON**, a graduate of the University of Chicago, began teaching in 1975 at Pacific Union College, where he helped create an interdisciplinary course on denominational history. He has published on Reconstruction, educational philanthropy, and Adventist history. He served as president of both Southwestern Adventist University and Pacific Union College. He recently retired as director of the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History.

**NIELS-ERIK ANDREASEN** is one of the most experienced educators in the Seventh-day Adventist system, having served 26 years as president of Walla Walla College and Andrews University. An Old Testament scholar educated at Vanderbilt University, he has published on topics ranging from the theology of the Sabbath to educational fundraising. He was the executive publisher of the landmark *Andrews University Study Bible*. In retirement, he serves as a member of the board of trustees at Pacific Union College.

**JONATHAN BUTLER** completed doctoral studies in American church history at the University of Chicago in 1975. A successful teacher at the primary, secondary, and college levels, he has published both popular and scholarly works on Ellen White. From a 1979 *Spectrum* essay titled, “The World of E. G. White and the End of the World” to his two chapters in the influential *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (2014), his scholarship has always provoked discussion and inspired new questions. He is currently writing a biography of Ellen White.

**DENIS FORTIN** is professor of historical theology and former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. His contributions to Adventist history and theology include writing the biography of a former General Conference president, *George I. Butler: An Honest but Misunderstood Church Leader* (Pacific Press, 2024), preparing a groundbreaking scholarly edition of Ellen White’s classic *Steps to Christ* (Andrews University Press, 2017; Oak & Acorn, 2025), and co-editing *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Review and Herald, 2013).

**LAWRENCE T. GERATY** is an archaeologist and academic leader. Born in sight of Ellen White’s Elmshaven estate, he is a child of Adventist missions, spending his formative years in China and Lebanon. After college in France, England, and California, he went on to graduate work at Andrews University and Harvard University. He has had extensive experience directing archaeological excavations in Jordan and Israel and is past president of the American Society of Oriental (now Overseas) Research. He served as president of two Adventist colleges—Atlantic Union College and La Sierra University. He was a part of the group that formulated Adventism’s “Fundamental Beliefs” in 1980.

**RONALD D. GRAYBILL** began studying primary sources on Ellen G. White more than fifty years ago. From his first book, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations*, published in

1970, to his most recent one, *Visions and Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White's Writings*, he has demonstrated a detailed mastery of the evidence. He has been a pastor, a researcher and administrator at the Ellen G. White Estate, and a teacher at La Sierra University. He earned a doctorate at Johns Hopkins University in 1983. He is one of the organizers of a weekly scholarly discussion group devoted to Ellen White.

GEORGE R. KNIGHT is the most prolific living scholar of Seventh-day Adventist history. Allegedly retired in rural Oregon, he continues to compose new books the old-fashioned way—in longhand on yellow pads. A recent example is *Ellen White's Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, and Enlightening Research* (Pacific Press, 2019). He has written, edited, or contributed to 96 books. The reach of his research is extended by the many scholars he has encouraged and mentored. He is the editor of the Adventist Pioneer Series, now standing at thirteen monographs.

DONALD R. McADAMS has had three careers: first as a history professor, then as a college president, and finally as a consultant on educational reform. His recent work, *Ellen White and the Historians: A Neglected Problem and Forgotten Answer*, is the culmination of research begun in 1971 as a teacher at Andrews University and continued during his service as president of Southwestern Adventist College (now University). This book, with its focus on Ellen White's use of history, prompted the 2023 conference that led to the present volume, *Reclaiming the Prophet*. McAdams holds a doctorate from Duke University.

PAUL E. McGRAW, currently academic dean at Hong Kong Adventist College, is an experienced preacher with a doctoral degree from George Washington University in American religious history. For two decades at Pacific Union College, he was an outstanding teacher of political thought, antebellum American history, and denominational history, with a particular focus on the ministry of Ellen White. He was a contributor to *Ellen Harmon White, American Prophet*.

GILBERT M. VALENTINE earned a doctorate at Andrews University in 1982 under the tutelage of George Knight. He has written extensively on Adventist history and is the author of *J. N. Andrews: Mission Pioneer, Evangelist, and Thought Leader* (2019), *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (2005), and *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) a study of the influence of Ellen White on early church leadership. His most recent work is the widely discussed, *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism 1966-1979* (2022). Recently retired from La Sierra University, he has held pastoral, teaching, and administrative positions in Pakistan, England, Thailand, Australia, and the United States.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**A**s editor of this volume, I have run up large intellectual debts. All the contributors to *Reclaiming the Prophet* have enthusiastically supported the process that turned a collection of stray conference presentations into a coherent book. Terrie Aamodt and Jonathan Butler have been particularly insightful in their counsel on everything from punctuation to felicitous word choice. They each deserve to receive the “Marian Davis Medal” for important but invisible help. Don McAdams greatly improved the title and organization of the book. George Knight first drew the attention of Pacific Press to our gestating publication, turning that vague academic promise of “forthcoming” into something solid. In addition to a book, the contributors have somehow created a powerful collegial spirit. Each of us is eager to continue learning from our fellow laborers.

I wish to thank all the participants in the 2023 conference on “Ellen White for Today,” meeting at the Walter C. Utt Center at Pacific Union College. It was wonderful to have a meeting made up only of scholars, with no formal audience and no concern about political representation. In a group of grizzled veterans, Katy Van Arsdale (of the Center for Adventist Research) could be said to be the “wave of the future.” Kristi Johnson (Tonge Foundation), Alexander Carpenter (*Spectrum*), and Dr. Tim Bainum gave philanthropic support to that conference, including those “high table” meals, complete with remarkably lively conversation. Pacific Union College was a welcoming host.

A year later there was an important authors’ consultation at La Sierra University. In addition to in-person participants, we had Zoom participants from as far away as Athens, Greece. Larry Geraty and John Thomas flawlessly organized the logistics.

In general terms, this books owes a great deal to a group of scholars who cannot stop thinking about the Adventist prophet. With a tip of the hat to a famous movie, this small group jocularly calls itself “The Dead Prophets Society” although, for them, Ellen White is very much a living influence. I deeply appreciate the persistence over the years of Gil Valentine, Kendra Haloviak Valentine, Jon Butler, Larry Geraty, and especially Ron Graybill, the most persistent of all.



# Reclaiming the Prophet

Books about Adventism's prophet can be controversial, with some authors rejecting her as a thief and imposter, while others insist she could do no wrong. A few of her followers have tried to make her infallible. This book aims at inspiring thoughtful conversation rather than vehement shouting.

It has been almost two hundred years since Ellen Gould Harmon White was born. Today we know more about her than ever before. Her voluminous private correspondence is now open for study, and researchers have discovered much about the historical background of her widely read books.

Eleven senior scholars think it is time for a new consensus. They have looked at a rich range of fresh evidence, from Ellen White's understanding of women's leadership to her teaching on "holy living," her use of history, and her power as an end-time preacher. These scholars, including five former college or university presidents, are not interested in rehashing old arguments.

The authors of *Reclaiming the Prophet* do not find the extremes to be believable, and they are determined to give a candid defense of a remarkable woman.

Eric Anderson, editor, is the founding director of the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History at Pacific Union College. He has been a history professor and college president at Pacific Union College and Southwestern Adventist University.

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